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THE SAINT OF THE SPEEDWAY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE DEVIL'S KEG
THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH
THE BROODING WILD
THE NIGHT RIDERS
THE WATCHERS OF THE PLAINS
THE COMPACT
THE TRAIL OF THE AXE
THE ONE WAY TRAIL
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THE TWINS OF SUFFERING CREEK
THE GOLDEN WOMAN
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THE LAW BREAKERS
THE SON OF HIS FATHER
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THE PURCHASE PRICE
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THE LAW OF THE GUN
THE HEART OF UNAGA
THE MAN IN THE TWILIGHT
THE LUCK OF THE KID
THE SAINT OF THE SPEEDWAY
THE RIDDLE OF THREE-WAY CREEK

THE SAINT OF THE SPEEDWAY

BY
RIDGWELL CULLUM

Author of the Books on the opposite page



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FOREWORD

If the reader will cast a thought back to the classic sea mystery of the *Marie Celeste*, it will be clear how much this book owes its inception to the extraordinary derelict, the mystery of which remains unsolved to this day. But the author disclaims any attempt in the following pages to offer a solution of the mystery, and has only used certain of the features surrounding the condition of the *Marie Celeste* at the time she was found abandoned in mid-ocean, for the purposes of his story-narrative

THE SAINT OF THE SPEEDWAY

CHAPTER I

THE ADVENTURERS

It was a time of tense emotion. Each was asurged with an almost uncontrollable excitement as the two men moved up the whole length of the riffled sluice. Neither uttered one single word. But they moved slowly on either side of the long, primitive, box-like construction, keeping pace each with the other, as though in a mutual desire that such fortune as was theirs should be witnessed together, as though neither had courage to face alone the possibilities of this their first serious "washing."

At each riffle the men paused. The more emotional of the two, Len Stern, thrust out a hand and stirred the deposit lying there. And at each stirring the same result was revealed. The riffles were filled with deposit. On the top was a spread of lighter soil, with here and there a dull yellow protrusion thrusting above it. But under this lay a solid thickness of pure alluvial gold in dust and smaller nuggets. From the top end of the sluice box to the mouth which disgorged the red soil upon the miniature mountain of tailings below it, it was the same. There was not one single riffle that was not laden to its capacity with the precious metal.

They came to a halt at the head of the box. Len Stern stood for a moment gazing down its narrow channel. But Jim Carver was disinclined for any dreaming. Stolid, practical, for all the emotion of those amazing moments, he climbed up the light trestle work and shut off the water stream which had supplied the washing. Then he dropped again to the ground and waited.

The stream of water fell away, and instantly the torrid heat of the sun began to dry up the wood-work. And as his gaze passed down over the succession of riffles the unshining yellow of their precious burden suggested a golden pathway the whole length of the sluice.

"It makes you feel good, Len," he said quietly, for all the burning excitement in his big blue eyes.

The other nodded, as though the thing he were contemplating had left him speechless.

Jim Carver eyed him shrewdly. Then he glanced up at the blazing tropical sky. He gazed down at the slow-moving river, meandering on between jungle-grown banks on its way to the bay, less than five miles distant. Finally he bestirred himself.

"We best clean this wash up, Len," he said. "We best clean it up an' take it right back to camp. It's feed time."

He started to work at the top riffle, and Len Stern came back to realities.

"Sure," he agreed, and at once joined in the work. "Say, Jim, do you get it?" he cried, glancing quickly at the mountain of pay dirt they had spent months in accumulating, standing ready for washing. "We guessed to wash a ton. Maybe it was more or less. Ther's not ounces in these riffles. No. Ther's—ther's pounds!"

Jim nodded as he laboured.

"It's the biggest 'strike' ever made in the world,"

he admitted in a tone that might well have been taken for one of grudging.

It was the north-west coast of Australia, the coast of that almost unexplored region which is one of the few remote territories of the world still retaining its fabulous atmosphere of romance.

It was on the shores of a wide, shallow bay where a small river abruptly opened out its land arms in welcome to the tropical ocean. Sunscorched, fleshy vegetation grew densely almost to the water's edge, keeping dank and fever-laden the suffocating atmosphere within its widespread bosom. Yet only was it this merciful shade that made life endurable to sensitive human creatures.

The sun was at its zenith, a furious disc of molten heat in a brazen sky. The sea at the river mouth lay dead flat under its burning rays, except for the ripple where some huge submarine creature disturbed its surface. Not a breath of air was stirring to relieve the suffocating atmosphere.

The two men were lounging in the shade of the wattle walls of their reed-thatched shelter. It was built amidst a cluster of dense-growing trees, and the site looked out over the brilliant bay. They had long since eaten, and were now awaiting the cooling of the day before returning to their labours.

They were youthful adventurers, foreigners to the country in which they found themselves. They were northerners, far-northerners, from the great snow-crowned hills of Alaska. They had set out on their adventure as a result of listening to the flimsiest, most fanciful yarn that ever a half vagrant Chinaman had dispensed out of the remote cells of his drug-laden imagination. And as a result, that day, after two and a half years of marooning on a coast peopled only by none too friendly blacks, and in the heart of

a jungle alive with every bug, beast, and reptile of a pestilential nature, they had, at long last, proved beyond every question of doubt that Charlie Wun Lee had, for once in his life, fallen a victim to sheer veracity.

For all its usually incredible source, the story, which had set these men wandering in the world's remote places, had had a curious ring of reality in it. Charlie Wun Lee was a queer, reasonably honest, far-travelled old Chinaman who dispensed ham and eggs to belated travellers in a squalid frame house in their home town of Beacon Glory, hidden away in the hill country of Alaska. And his story had been inspired by sheer friendliness for two men who found themselves in a position where the outlook for livelihood was completely threatening.

He had told them he knew where there was more gold than the world had ever seen before. And both being gold men, their appetites had been at once whetted.

Briefly, his story was that he had been shipwrecked when he was cook on an Australian coasting vessel. The ship went to pieces, but he and six others reached land after terrible privations. All they knew about their whereabouts was that it was the coast of Australia, somewhere on the north-west of the continent. It was a country of unbearable heat and fever-haunted jungle. They were marooned on this coast for more than a year, keeping body and soul together with such food as they could collect from the sea and the forest. Fortunately they had little need for clothing, for they discovered not a living soul, and no indication, even, of the blacks whom they knew peopled these regions of the country. But during that long, desperate year one by one his white companions had died off, victims of a subtle jungle fever that killed them slowly and painfully, until

only he and one other were left alive. This stealing death frightened him. The dank jungle became a place of dread. So he and his last remaining companion took to the river and sought to reach the hills out of which it sprang.

But they never reached the hills. No. The river claimed them. They forgot their fears. They forgot even their contemplated destination. In his own graphic fashion he told them the river was alive with gold. Gold looked up at them out of the pay dirt which composed its bed throughout its whole course. Oh, yes. They tried it out with such means as they had to their hands. But they only collected nuggets of reasonable size and troubled nothing with "dust." They collected a large quantity and secreted them, and it was this store that ultimately started him on the way to the prosperity he now enjoyed.

After this he endeavoured to study the coast-line with a view to making a chart at such time as he might be rescued, for he had never given up the hope that they would ultimately be rescued. And sure enough they were. A storm-driven coasting vessel ran into the mouth of the river for shelter.

They were taken on board and clothed. But they kept their secret of the gold, determined, should opportunity ever offer, to come again and work it. On the plea of desiring to know the position of the territory which had been so disastrous to them the skipper of the boat was induced to give them the exact bearings of the river mouth, and later, Charlie Wun Lee inscribed it on his rough chart, which he produced in corroboration of his story. He also produced for his audience a couple of nuggets of gold which he declared he had kept as a souvenir ever since.

But he shook his head sadly over them when he told how opportunity never came of returning to

collect the gold awaiting him. His companion died on the way to Sydney, a victim of the jungle fever, the germs of which had contrived to impregnate him. And he—well, other things came his way and he did not fancy facing the hateful coast alone. Besides, he did very well with the laundry he started in Sydney until he got burnt out, and finally migrated to Alaska. No, he assured them, he would rather dispense ham and eggs at two dollars a time in Beacon Glory than go back for that gold. Besides, his little gambling parlour at the back of his restaurant was not so bad a gold mine.

Well, anyhow, there it was. It was true what he had told them. Every word of it. And if they liked they could have the chart a present. And when they came back with all the gold they needed, if the jungle fever didn't get hold of them and they felt like making him a present in return, well, he would very gladly receive it. But, whether they chose to go after it or not, he wanted them to know that the thing he had told them was no fairy story, but the real truth which was a wholly inadequate illustration of the reality of wealth he had seen there.

Now they knew the real extent of the debt they owed to the friendly little dispenser of ham and eggs. But they also knew now, after the fierce excitement of witnessing the result of the first real washing had subsided, the immensities of the proposition confronting them. As yet neither had uttered a word of doubt or anxiety. But the thought of the potentialities of the situation was looming heavily.

Jim Carver's blue eyes were turned upon the sunlit bay. He was deeply engrossed, not in the wonders of the tropical scene set out before him but in a train of teeming thought. His pipe was his only real comfort on this intolerable coast, and he was enjoying it to the uttermost at the moment. Len Stern's dark

eyes were upon the small mountain of raw gold heaped on an outspread flour sack on the sun-baked ground in front of him, which represented the result of their first "clean-up." Whatever worries lay back of his mind his mercurial temperament refused to be robbed of one moment of the delight which this tangible result of their labours afforded.

"Man, I feel I just want to holler!" he cried, in a sudden outburst, breaking up the silence which was so much their habit. "Say, I just can't get a grip on the nature of a boy who sits around doping out ham an' eggs with the knowledge of a thing like this back of his mind. He's all sorts of a sheer damn fool——"

"Is he?"

Jim had removed his pipe. He had turned his big, thoughtful eyes on the man contemplating the heaped treasure. Len was gazing at him, his smile of delight completely passed from his dark face.

They were both big creatures. Broad, and enormously muscular, a picture of virile capacity and latent human energy. Jim's eyes were frankly wide and blue as the distant sea, set in a face whose skin lent itself to a deep, florid sunburn. Len was dark-eyed and dark-skinned. He was burned to the mahogany of a nigger. Both were clad in barely sufficient clothing to meet the demands of decency.

For a moment Len stared at his companion. Then his smile slowly returned.

"Say, Jim, boy, ain't ther' a darn thing in all this to set you crazy to shout?" He shook his head. "It's no sort of use. Your head's always ready to shelter every old bogey it can collect. Two an' a bit years of hell. That's what it's been. The folks guessed we were bug. The yarn of a ham slingin' Chink. A river of gold. An' I guess we came nigh breakin' our folks for outfit. Well, it's ours. All of

it. An' I guess we can pay our folk a hundred times over. It's a strike to unship the world's financial balance. Psha! It's so big——"

"That's the trouble, Len. It's too big."

Len flung his head back in a boisterous laugh.

"Too big?" he cried scornfully. "It just couldn't be."

"It could. It is."

Jim's unyielding tone promptly brought the other to seriousness.

"How?" he asked soberly. "Maybe I've got some of your notion. But let's talk it out."

Jim knocked out his pipe and refilled it. He lit it thoughtfully. Then he turned smilingly to his friend.

"Say, I'm as crazy for this thing as you, boy," he said, in his quiet way. "But I don't figger to let it snow my senses under. You're right. It's been two years an' more of hell gettin' it. And we want it all, after that. But I seem to see something of what was back of Charlie's mind quittin' the game an' never returning to it. Get a look down there." He pointed at a rough sheltered landing with a tubby, cutter-rigged fishing smack lying moored there. "That's our link with the world outside. An' we got to get out not pounds, but tons of metal if I'm a judge. We got to market it, an' keep it quiet, or we'll have the Australian government jumping in on us, to say nothing of all the rest of the world." He shook his head. "How's it to be done? It can't."

"But it can. It must."

Len's whole manner had undergone a complete transformation. All the excited delight had passed out of his eyes. They had suddenly become hard, and shrewd, and full of keen resolution. The thought of failure with the prize in their hands had stirred him to a feeling like that of a mother who sees her offspring about to be snatched from her arms. He

was ready to fight with the last breath of life for this thing he so dearly coveted.

"Here, you can't tell me a thing I haven't thought, Jim," he cried. "All this stuff's been in my brain tank ever since we bought that barge of ours down in Perth. I'd got it all then. An' I planned it all before we beat it up the coast in that old coaster, with our craft on a tow-line. You're right. It's got to be a secret. If we shout we'll lose half the game. Maybe we'll lose it all. We're not going to shout. No. I best tell you, an' we'll sort out the metal from the tailings. You've a cautious head and a clear brain. Maybe you'll see any weak spot lying around."

Jim nodded in ready agreement. He had achieved his purpose. Len was down to hard facts.

"This is the thing I got planned," Len went on, dipping his hands into the pile of gold and letting it sift back between his hard-worn fingers. "We've got to get a third feller into our game—on commission. We got to think wide, and act wide. We got to play a red-hot game, an' play it good. Ther's got to be no weakening, an' if any feller we work with plays the skunk he's got to get his med'cine short. You get that?"

Jim made no reply, but the look in his eyes was sufficient.

"Well, here it is," Len went on quickly. "If we dope this stuff out free we'll break the market, and set every news-sheet shouting from one end of the world to the other. And the folks'll jump in an' shut us down. We're sort of in the position of the feller who can transmute base metal. No. When we've a big enough bunch of stuff out I'm going to take a big trip down to Perth. I'm going to get a guy with a tramp ship, a 'windjammer' for preference. I'm going to fix up with him; he'll get a handsome commission on our trade of gold. And I'm going to bring

him along up, and have him stand off down the coast a few miles, an' then, with this old barge of ours, I'll come along and pick up all we got, an' haul it back aboard of his ship. Then you're going right along with him and the stuff, and you're going to travel from port to port and dispose of it for credit at such banks as will trade in smallish parcels. And meanwhile I'll stop right here on this coast, an' get stuff out ready for when you come back. Then I'll take a trip, an' you'll stop around. An' when we sold all we need we'll—quit. It's the only way, Jim. We got to play the smugglin' game, an' play it good. We got to take chances. Mighty big chances. I got to trust you, an' you got to trust me, an' we got to trust that skipper by makin' it worth his while, an' keeping a gun pushed ready. Ther's got to be no weakening. It's the only way I can see to put our play through. Otherwise our gold ain't worth hell room to us. Do you see it? Are you on? I want you to make that first trip because you got folks needing you worse than anyone needs me. That's one reason. The other is I want you to feel I'm putting right into your hands my share, and I'm not worrying a thing because that's so. See? We know each other. We're on the square. An' the thing I want from you is to keep the commission guy on the same angle. Well? "

"It's the sort o' thing I had in mind, Len, only I hadn't got it clear like you."

Jim knocked out his pipe and stood up stretching himself, while he gazed out over the flat calm of the bay.

"It goes. Sure it does," he said readily. "An' I'm glad for that thought that made you have me make the first trip. It's kind of generous, Len. But it's like you. Gee, I'm sick of this coast. Say, can you beat it? Here we are, two fellers takin' every chance in life to make an honest grub stake out of no-

man's land. And to do that we got to hunt our holes like gophers, lest folks get wise to us an' snatch it from us. It sort of makes you wonder. But you know, Len, this river's too rich. I sort of feel that. I kind of feel the thing's not goin' to be as easy as you make it seem. But we're goin' to see it through to the end. An' God help the feller that starts in to rob us. Yes, it's a kind thought of yours sending me on the first trip. I got a mother an' a dandy sister who'll likely bless you for this. I guess they're hard put all right, and the thought's had me worried for months. Say——"

He turned towards the river and glanced up at the sky. Len laughed.

"That's all right, Jim. I'm ready all the time," he said. "It ain't work gettin' back on the river. It's play. Come on. We're goin' to get out half a ton of stuff," he laughed, as he sprang to his feet. "Then I'll make Perth, an' buy up that tramp skipper."

He moved off beside his partner, leaving his golden pile just where it lay. And together they passed out of the shelter of the trees.

CHAPTER II

THE HEADLAND

THE woman was standing in the doorway of her log-built home. She was gazing out over the waters of the creek below her which flowed gently on to the distant Alsek River. A mood of quiet contemplative happiness was shining in her dark eyes. It was the mother soul in her that was stirred to a deep sense of happy satisfaction.

Rebecca Carver was a smallish, sturdy, vigorous creature something past the middle of life. She had lived hardly enough in the harsh Alaskan territory that had bred her and had always remained her home. And even now, with advancing years, and a body sometimes only barely equal to the onslaught of its pitiless climate, she had not even a momentary desire to leave it.

But then she had not lived unhappily. The years of her wifehood had been passed in the exciting, many-coloured, chequered life which ever falls to the lot of those who devote themselves to the crazy uncertainties of the quest of gold. No. Her life had never been monotonous. And besides the excitement of it all she had had her son, and daughter, and

her man. And these alone would have been sufficient to keep an atmosphere of smiling contentment in her woman's heart.

Now, however, her man had long since gone. Her son was far away, fending for them and himself as best he might. She only had her daughter remaining with her. But the girl was the pride and joy of her loyal heart; a blue-eyed, beautiful creature who never failed to remind her, to her contented satisfaction, of the cheerful, reckless, gambling husband who had been her strong support in the hard years of their life together.

Circumstances were hard pressing with her now. They had pressed heavily ever since the death of her husband. The future was full enough of threat to depress the stoutest heart. But, for the moment, she was not concerned with these things. It was the thought of her boy, her first-born, that filled her yearning soul with happiness. Only that morning her daughter had brought her out a letter from Beacon Glory. It was a letter at long last from Jim. And the tidings it yielded were of the best.

The day was utterly grey with the herald of coming winter. There had been no sun to relieve the dark-hued forests on the hills, which rose up on every side about her. The blistering summer heat had long since reduced all vegetation to the russet hues of fall. And even the great forests of jack-pine had lost something of the intensity of their evergreen hues. Somewhere behind her, hidden by a rampart of ironbound coast, lay the open seas of the North Pacific. For the rest, to the North, and East, and South, lay the tattered world of broken foothills which were the fringe of the greater hills beyond. She knew it all by heart, this world of southern Alaska which had always been her home. And for all the overwhelming nature of it, for all the threat of the heavy grey sky,

she feared nothing it could show her. And now, perhaps, less than ever.

She abruptly withdrew her gaze from the tumultuous scene of it all. She dived into the capacious pocket of her rough skirt. When her hand was withdrawn it was grasping the neatly-folded pages of a letter in a big, scrawling handwriting. She unfolded them and became deeply absorbed. She almost knew the contents of the letter by heart. But somehow she felt she could never read it often enough.

The letter was vaguely headed "Australia." It was without date. But this she had ascertained from its postmark, as she had also ascertained that it had been mailed in a city she had barely cognizance of, called "Perth."

"DEAREST MOTHER,

"We've made good. We've made so good I can't begin to tell you about it."

Just for a moment a deep sigh of happiness escaped the mother's lips, and something like tears of emotion half filled her eyes. She brushed them aside promptly however, and continued her reading.

"I don't know the date so I can't hand it to you. I can't hand you our whereabouts either, but for different reasons. What I can tell you is I'm setting right out for home as soon as Len gets along back, which'll maybe in six weeks. He's taking this letter with him, an' will mail it, which'll maybe in two or three weeks time. I'll be setting out in a windjammer called the *Imperial* of Bristol. When you read the name you'll wonder to see it in Len's handwriting. But you see he's taking the letter, and we don't know the name of the ship till he gets to his destination and charts it. See? So he'll have to fill the name

in. This'll all seem kind of mysterious to you, but it don't matter. The thing is I'm coming right along home to you, an'll reach you in about six months time, with enough stuff so you'll never have to worry a thing again ever."

The letter went on for several pages filled to the brim with that kindly, intimate talk which never fails to stir the depths of a mother's heart. And so Rebecca Carver read it all once again, revelling in the delight with which the words of her boy filled her.

Jim had made good. Jim was returning home. He was crazy to be with her and his sister Claire again. Oh, it was good, so good. The woman's brown eyes were raised smiling whimsically at the sudden thought which her mood had inspired. Why, it was all so good that she would almost joyfully accept whatever offer Bad Booker might make for their last block of real estate in the city of Beacon Glory, which now represented their entire resources for the coming winter. Yes, never in her life had she been so thrilled. Never.

She remembered earlier thrills. She remembered those hard times when they had been well-nigh confronted with starvation. She remembered how her husband, that headlong gambler, had set out to the gaming tables of Beacon Glory with their last remaining dollars in his pocket. And she had sat at home with her half-fed children awaiting his return. Then the joy of his return with pockets bulging. Yes. Those had been great moments. But then he was a skilful gambler and rarely failed. This—this was something on a different plane. Something——

Her contemplative gaze had discovered movement on the hillside across the water. It was a horse-drawn vehicle moving rapidly, descending the precipitate slope diagonally at the break of the forest

which gave way to the bald, windswept crest above. Its course would bring it down to the far side of the ford of the river directly opposite where she was standing.

Her smile deepened. It needed no second thought to tell her whose vehicle it was. Ivor McLagan, the oil man from the Alsek River, was on his way into Beacon Glory, which lay ten miles or so to the north-east of her home.

She awaited his arrival. He was a welcome enough visitor at all times. And he never failed to call in on his way, and leave her any newspapers he might chance to have. He was wealthy, and a man everybody esteemed. She had sometimes hoped—— But she knew that could never be. Claire was a girl of strong decision for all she was only twenty-one. She had already definitely refused to marry him. She liked him well enough. They all liked him. Especially had Jim liked him. But it was her woman's understanding of the position that made her fear that Claire's frank regard would never deepen to anything warmer.

The buckboard seemed to be almost falling down the precipitous slope under the man's reckless handling. It was literally plunging headlong. But she understood. She knew. It was McLagan's way with his Alaskan bronchos. There would be no disaster. And as she watched his progress she wanted to laugh, for such was the lightness of her mood.

The buckboard rattled, and shook, and jolted as it bustled down the hillside over a broken almost undefined trail. Its surefooted, well-fed team was utterly untiring. The shaggy creatures made no mistakes. Tough, hardy, they were bred to just such work as this, and they were in the hands of a super-teamster. So the creek came up to them with

a rush and they plunged belly deep into the chill water of the ford. Then, moments later, they were reined in sharply at the door of the man's familiar stopping place.

"Say, mam, this country's one hell of a proposition for a quiet, decent, comfort-loving, ordinary sort of engineer."

The man's greeting was full of cheer, and his smiling eyes conveyed a quiet sense of dry humour. Ivor McLagan had no claims to good looks, and his manner ordinarily was sufficiently brusque to border on rudeness. But in this woman's presence he had a way of displaying a side to his character that those who met him in business, those of his own sex, were never admitted to. No. McLagan had nothing in face or feature to thrill any woman's artist soul. But what he lacked in that direction he made up in another. As he turned his buckboard wheels and leapt to the ground he towered over the little woman in the doorway a figure of magnificent manhood.

Rebecca's eyes smiled up at him responsively.

"It surely is, Ivor. But I don't mind a thing. Jim's coming right back to me. He's made good, he and Len, an' he's coming home with stuff so we'll never need worry ever again."

It was out. The mother had to tell her glorious news on the instant. And to this old friend of her Jim's of all men.

Ivor nodded. Then came the quiet conventional reply.

"You don't say?"

The woman's excitement rose.

"But I surely do," she cried, holding up the bundled pages of her letter. "It's all right here. This is mail I got from him this morning. Claire brought it out from Beacon, bless her. My I—I sort of feel just anyhow. Ever feel that way? Ever feel you wanted

to dance around an' shout. Say—But come right in an' get some coffee. It's on the stove. I—I'm forgettin' everything."

Ivor shook his head.

"Don't you worry, mam," he said, in a tone of sympathy one would never have associated with him. "Just get busy an'—shout. But tell me first. When's Jim getting along?"

"Guess he's right on the way now." The woman's eyes were alight. Then a shadow crept into them. "He won't be along for six months from the start. Maybe that'll be three months an' more from the coming of this letter."

"Yes. It would be about that."

The man's eyes were serious as he regarded the letter bunched in Rebecca's hand. Then he looked up and was smiling again.

"I'm just so glad for you, mam, I can't say," he said cordially. "Jim's a great boy. He's got elegant grit, too. He's out for you an' Claire all the time. And I'll be real glad to have him around again for—for all your sakes. How does Claire feel? But there, I guess she's crazy glad. Where is she?"

He craned, peering into the doorway expectantly. But the mother shook her head.

"She's not inside," she declared. "Glad? Why it don't say a thing, Ivor. You know her. She and Jim are kind of all in all to themselves. She went sort of white as a corpse when she read that letter. She didn't say much. But if you'd seen her eyes. My! You can guess wher' she is now. Ther's only one place for Claire when Jim's on the water sailin' home. It's right up on the headland back of here," she jerked her greying head towards the back of the house. "She's right up there where she can see the sea. An' I guess she's dreaming fool dreams of his home-coming."

"Yes. I guess it's kind of wonderful for you both," Ivor said kindly.

"Wonderful? Sure it is. Ther's another thing. We been kind of in bad shape an' were selling out our last block in Beacon that my man left to us. Oh, I'm not really thinkin' of the stuff he's bringing. No," Rebecca went on, as though she feared the man might think that sheer selfishness were the substance of her delight. "But it helps. And Claire's been a heap worried dealing with Bad Booker. But it don't matter a thing now. We'll take what he offers an' be thankful."

Ivor had turned to his horses. He unloosed the halter shank of the nearside beast and secured it to the tying ring on the log wall of the house. Then he drew out a bundle of well-read newspapers and held them out to Rebecca.

"Here, take these," he said, in his quick, rough way. "I'll leave my plugs right here. They'll be glad to stand. I'm just going up to get a word with Claire. I'll bring her right along down."

The mother took the papers and threw them on to the table in the room behind her. Somehow her usual interest in them was overwhelmed.

"Thanks, Ivor," she said. "You never seem to forget us. I'll sure be real glad to have you bring Claire down with you. She's crazy glad, sure—we both are. But it don't seem time to me to be dream-ing around on any old hill-tops. I'll set coffee an' a bite to eat against you get back."

She watched him hurry away, this great creature all height, and muscle, and plainness of feature. She realised his eagerness, and again there arose in her mother heart that hope which her better sense sought to deny her.

The girl was gazing out upon the distant sea. The

iron-bound coast that lay immediately below her made no claim upon her, for all the wild beauty, the cruel austerity with which its ages-long battle with the merciless waters of a storm-swept ocean had endowed it. Neither had the panorama of tumultuous hills which rose about her, or the distant snowy crests of the northern reaches of the Rocky Mountains any appeal. She only had eyes for the grey, far-off horizon where sky and sea met. She was searching for some sign of a sail, which, in fancy, she might translate into the wings of the vessel bringing home a beloved brother and—fortune.

She was beautifully tall and slim, for all her somewhat rough clothing which had little more than warmth and utility to recommend it. It was the best that the joint efforts of her mother and herself had been able to contrive out of their limited resources, and the girl was not given to grumbling. No. She was accustomed to hardships, and self-denial came easy to her. She was too strong and resolute, she was too frankly generous to harbour any petty resentment against her lot.

In twenty-one years she had grown to superb womanhood, healthy in mind, healthy in a wonderful degree in body. Her father had seen something of her splendid development before he died, but it was left to her mother to witness the final reality of it. To the latter her child was the most beautiful creature in all the world. Her wide blue eyes, and her wealth of flaming red hair, her shapely body, so tall, and vigorous, and straight; then her sun-tanned, rounded cheeks, and her well-chiselled nose, and broad, even brows; were they not all something of a reflection of the early youth of the man who had given her her own life's happiness? Time and again her mother had rejoiced that she had had her christened with so choice a name as "St. Claire." True the "Saint"

had been permitted to fall into disuse. But it still belonged to her, and nothing could rob her of it. And the mother only regretted that the girl herself refused to permit its revival.

Just now the girl had given herself up to idle moments of delicious dreaming. And why not? Difficulties and troubles had beset them for so long. Oh, yes. She had no scruple in admitting the bald, hard truth. Not alone was her joy at the prospect of Jim's return. He was returning with some sort of fortune, for them as well as himself.

It would mean so much to them. Her mother would know ease and peace of mind after all her heroic struggles with adversity. Jim would be freed from his great responsibility for their care. And she—she—well, there were so many great and wonderful things in the world she wanted to do and see.

And dreaming of all that this splendid return meant to them her mind went back to the interview she had had only that morning in Beacon Glory with the man everybody called "Bad" Booker, the chief real estate man in the city.

Her journey into town had been inspired by their necessity. Her mother still owned a small block of property in Beacon Glory, the last remaining asset left to her by her gambler husband. It was mortgaged to Booker, himself, but only lightly, and she had visited him to endeavour to sell it right out. Without Booker's help they possessed less than twenty dollars with which to face the winter, and await Jim's return. She took no account of the played-out gold claim on the creek below her. That had ceased to yield a pennyweight of gold more than two years back, a fact which had been the inspiration of her brother's going.

She remembered Booker's smiling fat face and bald head as she offered him her proposition. He always

smiled, and it was a hateful, greasy, fixed sort of smile. She believed he was a Jew. But Jew or Gentile he was a merciless money-spinner, ready to rob the world of its last dollar.

Her anger surged even now with her thought of the man. He had offered to take the block off her mother's hands for two thousand dollars cash. It was the limit to which he would go. It was mortgaged for two thousand dollars to him. It was in the very centre of Beacon Glory, next to the Speedway Dance Hall. And even though the city was dead flat as a reaction from its early boom the property was worth not a cent less than ten thousand dollars. It was maddening. It was a sheer "hold-up." But she knew they were helpless in the man's hands. Oh, if they could only tide over until Jim got back.

She had told her mother not a word of the man's offer yet. Somehow she felt she had not the courage to tell her. Yet she would have to do so, and, worst of all, she knew they would have to accept the man's offer or starve.

Well, she would have one slight consolation. Once the deed was signed, and the money was in her hands, she would tell "Bad" Booker all that was in her mind. She——

The sound of a footstep behind her broke up the half fierce, almost tearful train of her thought. She turned sharply to discover Ivor McLagan breathing heavily after his climb.

"Say, Claire," he cried, while he spread out his hands deprecatingly, and his smallish eyes twinkled humorously. "Why in the name of everything holy make this darn country worse than it is? Why you need to climb a mile high to enjoy the thought of your Jim, boy, coming along I just can't see? I surely can't." Then he glanced quickly out to sea and

took a deep breath. "My, but this is a swell spot," he added soberly.

The girl's bad time had passed. Her smile came on the instant.

"That's quite a contradiction," she said silyly.

"Sure. Well, we'll cut the first part right out." McLagan's twinkling gaze came back to the girl's face. And he drank in the fresh beauty of it. "I couldn't pass along into that nightmare city of ours without speaking my piece of gladness for your news. It's bully. It certainly is. The boy's made good. An' for you folks, I guess, only just in time."

The girl nodded as she looked up into the man's plain face and a flash of thoughtful regret for its plainness broke in on all the rest that preoccupied her.

"I doubt if it's even that, Ivor," she said, a little desperately."

"How?"

The man's interrogation was a return to his roughness of manner.

"Why, Bad Booker's got us right in his clutches, and we can't even wriggle. He reckons to hand Mum two thousand on top of his two thousand mortgage for a block of stuff you could market free for ten thousand. It's his two thousand or—or starve."

The girl finished up with a smile that failed to hide her feelings and McLagan's eyes hardened.

"The man's a swine," he said, and his voice grated harshly.

"That don't help."

"No. Don't accept, Claire. Don't you sell."

"But we've got to eat."

"Sure. An' you're going to. Here." Just for a second the man hesitated, and shifted his gaze from the beautiful urgent face that never more deeply appealed to him than now. Then it came back on

the instant. "It's no use," he cried, and his tone was rough. "You're not going to starve. You and your mother can have all the cash you need till Jim comes. And—and I want nothing in return. Do you get my meaning, Claire? If you take money on loan from me till Jim gets to home you'll never have need to worry. You can just shut it right out of your head and forget it—till Jim comes home. I mean that just plain an' straight. And there isn't a thing behind it."

They stood eye to eye while the girl swiftly read the sheer honesty lying behind the man's eyes. Then she shook her head.

"No," she said. "I'm going to sell. I'm going to sell, and I'll just wait around after, hoping for the day to come when the Aurora Clan will reckon that Bad Booker's a sort of nightmare disease an' needs plenty good med'cine. Thanks, Ivor. It's just a real kind thought of yours. And the thing that makes me glad is I know you mean it just as you've said it. But I don't want your money. I—I wouldn't take it if it was that or—or starve."

For all there was something of roughness in the girl's choice of words for her refusal there was none in her manner. Even her hope that one day Booker would receive his med'cine at the hands of the secret Aurora Clan was without undue feeling. The man was deeply stirred.

They were great friends, these two. But for the man's peace of mind the frank nature of their friendship was deplorable. He loved the girl with all the strength of his manhood. He held a big position with the Mountain Oil Corporation of Ohio as their consulting engineer, and his whole desire was to take this child of the northern wilderness away to his far-off home in the sunlit valleys of California. She had refused to marry him more than once. But somehow

her refusal had left their friendship unaffected. She liked him whole-heartedly in a manner that to her precluded all possibility of regard of a deeper nature, but which in the man only contrived to strengthen his natural persistence.

The leaping fires of the man's passion surged up in face of the rebuff. For a brief moment he contemplated the smiling eyes in their wonderful framing of vivid hair, which the slouch-brimmed hat she was wearing failed to conceal. Then his lips obeyed his impulse.

"Yes. I know, Claire," he said, his voice harshened by emotion. "You won't, you can't accept my help. Why? I'll tell you. Because I don't belong to you. Because I want to marry you, am crazy with love for you, and you don't feel like falling for my notion. So you can't have the thing I want to do for you like I never wanted to do for anybody ever before. I guess you're right enough in your own lights. Sure you are. You're not putting yourself under obligation to the feller you don't fancy to marry. But why not marry me, Claire? Maybe I'm not a thing of beauty. But I guess I just love you to death. Maybe you don't care a thing for the picture I make now, but you'll get used to it. Sure you will." He laughed a little bitterly. "I guess folks can get used to most things after awhile." Then his smile passed. "But, my dear, ther's not a thing in the world I wouldn't do to give you a real dandy life. These oil wells out here are going to pass me a fortune that I'm crazy to share with you. Won't you? No. You won't. I can see it in your eyes, the same as I've seen it before. But—but if I've still got to stand for that there's things I won't stand for. You need help and I'll raise all the hell I can to pass it you."

Claire shook her head a shade impatiently.

"It's no use, Ivor. Why, why can't we be friends?"

True I haven't a thing against you in the world. Not a thing. Not even—" she smiled gently—" the looks which you don't seem to set much stock by. No. It isn't anything like that. True it isn't. I like you, but—Here, you don't get the things lying back of my fool head. Guess I'm my father's daughter. You knew him for what he was. He was a gambler. And maybe, in a way, I'm a gambler, too. I want life with all its chances. I want to reach out an' hug it all. I want to take every chance coming, and do something, and be something in the game of it all. I don't want to marry. Sure not yet. I don't want to share in any man's home, and—and grow on like a cabbage. There's too much of the big adventure in life for me to miss it all. Maybe I'll get sort of disillusioned later. Maybe. I can't help that. But I mean to take a hand in the game meanwhile."

There was such a ring of final resolution in the girl's smiling denial that the man realised his momentary defeat. So he offered no further protest. He made no attempt at argument. He shrugged his great shoulders, and the happy twinkle returned to his eyes.

"Don't say another word, Claire," he said gently. "Maybe I understand the thing lying back of your mind. Forget my break. It was a bad one. And I shouldn't have made it, but—but I sort of just had to. I won't do it again. There isn't some other feller, is there?"

The girl laughed happily in her relief at his manner.

"Not a soul," she cried unhesitatingly.

"That's all right." The man's eyes smiled responsively. "I can wait. I'm going to. And I'll make no more bad breaks. And maybe when you've hit your adventures, and kind of tired of them, and feel you'd like the rest you'll have maybe earned, why I'll be waiting around, and I'll surely be ready to hand it you when you raise a finger as sign. An'

meanwhile, my dear, I'd be glad to have you feel ther's no sort of trouble in the world so big I wouldn't be glad to smooth out for you." He suddenly spread out his muscular hands. "These two hands are for you, night or day, all the time. And I've two ears that'll hear the faintest whisper of trouble that's worrying you. Say, come along right down. Your mother's crazy to talk your Jim to you, and she asked me to bring you to home."

The man's whole manner was so gentle as to be irresistible. For all the thing that lay between them there had never been a moment when he had made so great an appeal to the girl. His normal roughness she knew to be but an unfortunate garment in which he clothed himself. Now, as times before, she was listening to the real man so surely hidden from the world that looked on. She was not without a shadow of regret that she could not see in him the man of her desire. Without a word of protest she permitted him to lead the way down from the bald crest of the headland.

CHAPTER III

IN BEACON GLORY

IVOR McLAGAN eased his great body in the groaning wicker chair, and his eyes snapped with something like irritation. The long, lean cigar it was his habit to smoke he removed from between his lips, and indicated the main thoroughfare beyond the window behind him.

“Don’t tell me you’ve a hunch for this muck-hole, Victor,” he said sharply. “Take a pull at yourself, man. Get a cold douche, if you can find a thing so wholesome in Beacon Glory, and wake yourself right up. Take a look out there. Take a peek around you. And if you aren’t as blind as a dead mule, and a sure candidate for the foolish place, you’ll see this darnation monument to human vanity as it is. I tell you there’s no sort of limit to human vanity when it gets a-riot fixing cities. Beacon Glory? Did you ever call a hog-pen by any other fancy name? Sure you didn’t. You aren’t plumb crazed yet, for all you’re talking this burg as though winter had no right hiding it up six months of the year. Get a look at the garbage lying around even the business avenue. Avenue! Sounds fine, doesn’t it? And then think of the hell of flies and skitters you got

to live through next summer. Look at the shanties lying scattered around desecrating a swell picture of Nature's painting. They're enough to insult a half-breed settlement that don't know better. But that's no circumstance to the folks who're to blame for despoiling God Almighty's decent earth with a pestilential collection of man's assorted junk. The moral atmosphere of Beacon Glory would leave the hottest oven in hell hollering. There's more dirt an' dishonesty to the square inch in Beacon Glory than you'd ever find in any mediæval Turkish penitentiary, kept especially for housing the folks they don't like the faces of. And they call this quagmire of corruption Beacon Glory! They laid it out in avenues! They filled it up with garbage an' human junk. An' folk like you sit around with your hat in one hand, and the other on your left chest, and breath the word 'city' in the sort of tone you'd hand out over a death-bed. That's you, who don't belong to it. You, who aren't any sort of part of it, except you're here to collect any stray gold lying around, and pass it back to your home city. You, a banker. My, it's queer how folks can fall for their surroundings."

Victor Burns laughed cordially at his friend's diatribe. It amused him thoroughly. McLagan was on his pet theme, which was an utter contempt and detestation of the city of Beacon Glory.

"That's all right, Ivor," he said. "You can't run a branch of your Bank, and shout at the folks you do business with. For just as long as it's my job collecting the dust folks don't know better than to waste their lives chasing, Beacon Glory's a deal bigger than 'ace high' to me. It's a swell city that does a mighty big credit to the folks whose enterprise set it up—and made my living possible. You're collecting oil in the big valleys, which is liable to leave you finding a queer sort of human fog lying about our principal avenue.

But I'd like to say the 'muck-hole' of Beacon Glory don't hurt your prospect a cent, and you'd miss its 'beauties' if the foolish ones had never dumped it down."

McLagan laughed good-naturedly, and returned his cigar to its place in the corner of his capacious mouth. They were lounging in the office of Beacon Glory's principal hotel, this engineer of the Mountain Oil Corporation and the chief banker of the place. They were something more than business acquaintances. A pleasant friendship existed between them, inspired perhaps by mutual esteem for the other's integrity in surroundings which each knew to be something morally deplorable.

The hotel—the Plaza by name—was an angular three-storied, wooden frame building that had once been well and truly painted. But that was in the boom days. It had a verandah fronting on the city's only business avenue, a long, unpaved thoroughfare that had wrecked the running gear of more vehicles in its time than any roadway the world had ever known. Over the verandah, on a level with the first floor, was a wide balcony of similar proportions. In the heyday of prosperity this had been covered by a brilliant striped awning, but that, like the outside paint, had long since yielded to the weather. But for all its dreary, derelict appearance the Plaza stood out amongst the rest of the city's buildings, with one or two exceptions, as something rather magnificent, if only for its proportions.

McLagan and the banker had the office with its decayed furniture and spluttering wood stove to themselves. That is, they only shared it with its atmosphere of general uncleanness. It was the hour immediately before supper, a meal which Abe Cranfield's fly-blown menu described as "dinner," a title his boarders refused to accept. Soon contingents of humanity

would foregather in anticipation of a meal to sustain stomachs which had long since learned to satisfy themselves on a diet of unsavoury monotony.

"That's all right, Victor," McLagan said readily. "You're a banker. I'm not. I'm just a hard citizen the same as the rest, and don't need to worry to keep my notions of Beacon Glory to myself. And if any feller feels like disputing, why, I can argue it out any old way he fancies. But I'm sick with this city the same as I'm sick with most things unclean. I guess it isn't altogether the fault of folks so much as the times, and the thing life's drifted into. Does it ever worry you thinking of modern conditions, and the crazy scramble of it all? You know I ought to've been born two or three centuries back, before some fool guy invented the words 'democracy' and 'proletariat.' You can't run a thing right by committees and assemblies set up by any popular vote. Think of me trying to locate oil in the hills back here with a bunch of guys sitting around telling me how I need to go about it, and where to start my drills. No, sir. It's the same with countries, and cities, and Sunday Schools. You need one head, and one hand. And whether for good or bad you'll get some sort of order and discipline, and things'll move quick. I'd say it's better, seeing human nature is what it is, to let one feller graft than a government of hundreds. And it's cheaper. This territory's run by a government that only cares for its job and legislates thousands of miles away. What's the result? Why—Beacon Glory. An undisciplined quagmire of human muck."

Victor Burns lit a cigarette and grinned through the smoke. He was a small, round, sleek little man, clean-shaven and with a pleasant face that looked to be made for smiling. He was almost in ridiculous contrast to the huge frame and rugged exterior of the other.

"That's all so, all right," Burns nodded. "I've thought heaps more than that lying awake at nights wondering how far the other feller's got me beat. But a grouch in this office isn't going to fix things right." He glanced alertly round the room which still remained empty. "And that's why I'm kind of glad for that bunch of boys who got together to try and clean things up. It don't matter to me who or what the folks of the Aurora Clan are, or the ultimate purpose lying back of their game. They started out a year ago to clean things up some, and they got half the toughs of this burg scared to foolishness. There hasn't been a 'hold-up' in months, and only a week back these white-gowned purifiers burnt out stark that drug den of Bernard's, where Charlie O'Byrne was done to death for his wad. Say, those boys are right if they just stick right to the game they started on. The danger is, when they got Beacon where they need it, and have cleaned up the tougher stuff of the place, they may be looking for payment."

Ivor shook his head.

"You never can tell, Victor," he said seriously. "They're a terror to the muck of this place now, I agree. Maybe later they'll be a terror anyway. That's the way of these things. So long as they act the way they are we're all glad. We must be. Any feller with a wide mind would be crazy to feel bad about them. But," he shook his head, and flung the stump of his cigar almost viciously into the stove, "maybe it'll just drift into the usual. With the others out of the way they'll do the 'hold-up.' Then the Government, thousands of miles away, 'll butt in. The Aurora Clan will get cleaned right up, and back we'll fall into the muck those boys did their best to haul us out of. No. I've a brief for them. I surely have. But when they've done their work, and start getting gay for themselves, I'll be as ready

as anyone to start cleaning them up. It's a hell of a place anyway."

McLagan remained gazing into the stove with eyes that had lost their usual twinkle. He was a man of immense resolution and capacity. A brilliant mining engineer, he yearned for wider scope in the affairs of life. So far all his energies had been directed to the earth's remote places, seeking those treasures for his Corporation which at any cost must be acquired for the purposes of satisfying voracious shareholders. And Victor Burns, watching him, understood something of the restless, dissatisfied spirit driving him. He was a shrewd judge of men, as are most real bankers, and this burly, plain creature, all energy and capacity, more than usually interested him.

"How's oil?" he asked quietly, as the other remained silent.

"Just about the same." Ivor laughed in his short way. "Oh, it's there all right. It's there plenty. The Alsek valley's full of it—when we can reach it. That's one of the things makes me feel bad for this place. When we strike it, as we're sure to, the old gold boom that bred this city won't be any sort of circumstance."

"When'll that be?"

Burn's eyes were shrewdly inquiring. It was his business to be well-informed.

"Any old time. Maybe a month. Maybe two years." McLagan shook his head. "You can't just say. But two years from now is our limit. That'll make a seven year prospect."

"I see." Burns nodded and glanced round. The door had opened to admit the first arrival of the boarders. "Well, we need it. There's some gold flowing in slowly from the country. But things are dead flat, and I can't even begin to guess where the folks collect the dollars spent at the Speedway

every night. Max, there, tells me he's looking to a big spending winter, but I don't see how he figures it. Howdy, Tilbury," he nodded at the new arrival. "Where's your partner, Allison?"

The newcomer, slight, short, and with greying hair, nodded back a greeting.

"Oh, I guess he's on the bum around. He'll be along. Glad to see you, Mr. McLagan," he said, turning quickly and almost deferentially to the engineer. "Opened up a gusher yet?"

McLagan's eyes twinkled as he rose from his protesting chair.

"Guess I'll be asked that haf a century of times before the night's out. No, boy," he said. "The old earth's holding up her secrets, and looks like holding 'em years. An' say, you'll be doing me real service putting that news around when the boys come in to feed. Put it round quick, while I go and wash. Travelling's a mighty dirty pastime around Beacon Glory, which is only reasonable."

And he passed out of the office just as a distant bell rang announcing the evening meal.

"Bad" Booker was sitting in his private room behind the outer office. It was a comfortable apartment, almost sumptuous, and seemed to be the natural setting for the personality of this real estate man. He was a heavy creature with a flowing moustache, of which, to judge by the inordinate care he bestowed upon it, he was exceedingly proud. He was fat, and everything about him was gross. His general appearance and manner were of extreme good nature, and his smile to this end was of a quality admirably calculated to emphasise it. But Beacon Glory knew the man, because, whatever other things Beacon Glory may have lacked, it had a swift estimate of those who were part of its public life. Those whose mis-

fortune made it necessary to come into business contact with Bad Booker hated and detested the man, and more particularly his smile. For they quickly found that the real estate mask was incapable of long concealing the ugly features of the usurer underneath.

He was smoking a pungent Turkish cigarette liberally besprinkled with gold lettering. And the while he was studying the extensive deed of title relating to a corner block in the chief avenue of the city. An air of calm satisfaction pervaded the man, for he knew that the property under consideration was about to fall into his hands at a price which even he regarded as advantageous. It was what he desired.

He was a shrewd creature with a wide vision in the matter of self-interest. Whatever others might think of Beacon Glory, he, at least, had no doubts. He realised with absolute certainty that the place was there to stay. It was within twenty miles of a fine, wide harbour for shipping from the South. It was built on the shores of a large lake whose name, since the city's building had become associated with the place, and it occupied a site in the heart of a splendid valley which ran right down to the sea, and was the highway to the interior of Alaska through the otherwise almost impassable world of the southern hills. It was the centre of a gold region that was as yet in its infancy. Furthermore, there was coal, and iron, and undoubtedly oil in abundance in the broken world about it. The place was "flat" now as a reaction from its original boom, but it was moving steadily if slowly, and the right men were drifting in with a view to exploring its resources.

Very quietly and unostentatiously he was acquiring every property that fell into the market so long as the price met his ideas of investment. He was ready to mortgage for any town property. Smiling at all

times, his purse was always open for any proprietor of a town lot who needed temporary assistance. The man was a merciless money-spinner of the worst type. Disaster and misfortune to others were the conditions under which his real business prospered.

He laid the documents aside, and lit a fresh cigarette from the remains of the other which he dropped thoughtfully into the silver-mounted ash-tray on the desk beside him. Then he sat back in his chair, and, with his fleshy hands clasped over his ample stomach, gave himself up to a few moments of rapid mental calculation.

But his efforts were broken in upon. There was a light tap on the opaque glass of the door that shut him off from the outer office, and a clerk pushed his way in.

In an instant his smiling habit returned, but his tone of greeting was sharp.

"What in hell is it this time, Jake?" he demanded, while his hands fell away from his stomach.

Jake Forner was a mild looking creature whose face gave no true indication of the man behind it. He was broad and angular, with shoulders that looked sizes too big for the rest of his body. He was clean-shaven, with the wide brow and big dark eyes of the student. But his mouth and jaws were firmly set and suggested possibilities.

"It's an open letter," he said. "And it was handed in by a kid I just didn't seem to rec'nise. I didn't feel like worrying you with it till I opened it. Then I guessed I'd best pass it in to you right away."

He came over to the desk and held out an open sheet of paper, while his dark eyes closely scrutinized the smiling features of his employer.

Booker took the paper without interest for all the other's quietly impressive manner. He glanced at

the open sheet casually, and, in a moment, his attention became profoundly absorbed.

Jake Forner was watching him. His eyes had something in them that suggested smiling thought behind them. He was noting his employer's expression, and saw it change rapidly from its habitual smile to complete seriousness, and, finally, to something that seemed to suggest anger not undriven by alarm.

It was a curious document littered with a scrawling writing made up of rough block capital letters and evidently indited by some rough instrument, possibly a piece of sharpened wood. The lettering was red and at the bottom of it, underneath the signature, was the rough outline of a skull and crossbones, a flamboyant, melodramatic finish that might well have inspired derision. But somehow the thing inspired nothing of the sort in the mind of the man to whom it was addressed. He read it carefully.

"BAD BOOKER,

"You are trying to steal a city block from a helpless client. You have a mortgage on it for \$2000°. You are offering \$2000° more to wipe out the mortgage and possess the lot. The lowest market value of the property is \$10000°. You will pay the difference between your mortgage and \$10000°, namely \$8000° for the site. You have twenty-four hours in which to make a written offer of this amount. If you fail to do this, and to complete the deal in one week from this date, you will be hanged on the site in question.

"Sgd. CHIEF LIGHT OF THE AURORA."

Booker did not look up as he finished the reading. He sat gazing at the paper, and once or twice Jake Forner observed that he swallowed drily. Then, as the man remained furiously silent, the clerk cleared his throat.

"That's about as ugly as I've known 'em to play," he said, in a tone of mild sympathy.

Booker laid the paper down and raised a pair of angry eyes. The clerk saw the storm in them and waited for it to break. It came on the instant.

"The swines!" Booker's body was squared in the well-padded chair. He was sitting up and breathing heavily. "The dirty, low-down swines!" he cried. Then a heavy fist was raised and fell with a crash on the ill-drawn sign of the skull. "If they think they can scare me with a bluff like that I reckon they're crazy. It's a hold-up. And I'm falling for no 'hold-up.' By God! I'll fight them. Eight thousand? Not on your life. I'll press that two thousand home right away and show 'em they can't throw a bluff at me and get away with it. They want a written offer. Well, I guess they'll get it. I'll write it now, an' you can beat it out to the Carver woman, and put it right into her hands. But it's for two thousand dollars. And I guess she'll fall for it quick or—starve."

He pushed the Aurora Clan's document roughly aside, and started to write out his offer. But Jake anxiously intervened. He quickly raised a white hand and passed it across his broad forehead.

"I wouldn't act in a hurry," he said quickly. "You're bucking a tough game with the 'aces' against you. The Aurora bunch have been mighty busy in the past weeks. Is it worth it? Just look back an' see. Bernard's is gone. Clean wiped out, an' he's had to beat it out of Beacon looking like a black rooster that hasn't moulted right. Then there was Pat Herne who robbed Len Sitwell when he was soused at the Speedway. They hanged him right outside the town limits. Then don't forget Dick Mansell, who held up the stage coming in from Ranger. He was left pumped full of lead till you couldn't tell

his guts from an ash riddle. I'm scared for you, boss. I surely am. Ther's a terror creepin' through this place scares me plumb to death. These guys are a citizen bunch and no sort of ordinary toughs. They're acting seemingly with some sort of slabsided purpose. They're wise to every move going on, an' I can't reckon how they get hold of things. But there it is, and when they hand in a brief on a boy they put through the thing it says. We're a business enterprise, boss, and it's our job to beat the other feller if we can. But I sort of feel when ther's a hanging bee at the end of it business goes right out. Don't you jump, boss. Sure I'm scared. I haven't your nerve. But I got it right here," and he tapped his forehead with a forefinger, "this is no sort of bluff. It's dead straight. An' I'm not yearning to see you swinging on the wrong end of a rawhide rope."

Jake spoke quietly but urgently, and his usually mild eyes were a match for his manner. He was Booker's confidential clerk, a man of quiet efficiency and whose vision was unusually clear. So, for all his swift wrath, Booker had let him talk. Now, however, the usurer leapt uppermost and his reply was swift and biting.

"You want me to hand out eight thousand at the orders of this gang?" he cried furiously. "You want me to pass eight thousand good dollars to Rebecca Carver when she's ready to close for two? You're crazy, Jake. Crazy as a bed-bug. If that's the sort of business we're to do I guess the sooner we close our doors and beat it the better. Besides——"

"And the hanging bee?"

The eyes of the clerk were steadily regarding his furious chief. And somehow the quiet reminder was not without effect. Booker shifted his gaze and it fell on the lamentable design of the skull.

"This thing sets me crazy mad," he protested,

and his tone had somehow fallen from its original bluster.

"But you'll be madder—for awhile—at the hanging bee."

Booker broke into a short, harsh laugh at his clerk's persistence in dwelling upon the thing he saw lying ahead.

"That stunt has got you scared all right, Jake," Booker said, with a world of contempt in the quick look he raised to the man's pale face. "Maybe you're guessing, seeing you're my clerk, they'll need you to be present to share in the game."

A flush mounted to the clerk's cheeks.

"You can guess that way if you fancy, boss," he retorted, in a pronounced change of tone. Then his eyes searched the fat, unsmiling face before him. "But you best get this right now and get it quick. I'm out for your profit as well as my own. I'm out to see this business go right on without any interruption in the nature of a hanging bee. If you collected that chunk of real estate for \$2000⁰⁰ on top of the mortgage it would be a swell profit. Some folks might call it robbery, seeing they ain't in it. But \$10,000⁰⁰ is bedrock just now as they say in that brief. And, when boom time comes again, you won't miss the \$6,000⁰⁰ difference they're demanding. Well, I guess I'd buy off a hanging bee, with me as the centre piece, any old time for \$6,000⁰⁰. And if you're wise I guess you'll act that way, too."

"But you're forgetting the bluff of it all," Booker said without looking up. Then he raised his hard eyes. "Gee, haven't you any sort of old guts makes you want to kick? Can you stand for a thing like that?" he cried, holding up the ill-written document. "Are we men, or——"

"We certainly wouldn't be men for long if we didn't stand for it. You don't seem to get a grip of this

thing, boss. I've watched it all the time. This Aurora bunch is as real as the old Klu-Klux Klan, that cleaned up the south in the nigger days. You're wondering if we're men. Well, I'd say right here, let's be. Don't write your offer in a hurry. Think awhile. An' when you thought good I'll saddle my pony and ride out to Rebecca Carver with the result. It won't hurt us to get that block at the price they say. But it will at any other. I'm making that tracing of the new city limits, and need to get right on with it. Maybe in awhile you'll let me know the thing you've decided."

Jake turned away and passed quickly into the outer office, closing the partition door carefully behind him. Booker watched him go with eyes which had doubt in them for the first time. Yielding was utterly foreign to his nature where advantage in a transaction lay within his grasp. But the mild-eyed clerk had driven home his argument in a fashion all the more relentless for its sobriety. And for once in his life Bad Booker, the usurer, was thinking more of the vision of a hanging as conjured by his subordinate than he was of robbing a helpless widow of six thousand dollars.

CHAPTER IV

THE GREAT DISASTER

THE mother was sitting over her cookstove. She was almost crouching over it. With her hands tightly clasped she seemed as though she were striving with every resource of her being to support herself under the crushing weight of the great grief with which she was beset. Her widely gazing eyes were straining with the mental anguish behind them. And they were utterly unseeing, for all they stared into the ruddy heart of the fire shining between the upright bars. Stony misery looked out of them, that dreadful expression of heartbreak which seems to leave a woman powerless, helpless.

The living room about her was neat, and of its usual orderliness. It lacked nothing of the housewifely care that was usually bestowed upon it. For all the poverty of its furnishing it was a place of comfort, which, even under Rebecca Carver's suddenly imposed grief had not been allowed to suffer. Her daughter Claire had seen to that. For the time her mother was submerged in her trouble, and the girl herself was no less stricken, but will and youth in the latter had over-ridden every weakness of the moment.

Thus the mother had sat for many hours. And the

transformation which had taken place in her in twenty-four hours was something almost horrifying to the devoted daughter.

During the long hours of night the still, silent figure had nursed her despair. Claire, no less sleepless, had discovered her in precisely the same position each time she had left her bed in an adjoining room. She had prayed her mother, she had sought to persuade her by every means in her power, to seek her bed, and such peace as sleep might afford her. But it had all been useless. Each time her mother had obeyed her submissively, meekly, almost mechanically, only to return again to her vigil at the fireside the moment she had been left alone.

The grey afternoon was far advanced when Claire returned from the creek below with her arms full of a snowy laundry. Work. It had been the same all day with her. It was her only defence. She pushed her way in through the half-open door, and one swift glance, and the sound of rustling paper, as she deposited her burden on the well-worn table, told her of the unchanged mental attitude of her mother.

Just for a moment she stood regarding the bowed figure with troubled eyes. She saw the crumpled news-sheet, one of the papers which Ivor had left with them the day before. It was crushed under her arms as they rested in her lap. And she understood. Her mother had been reading again, perhaps for the hundredth time, that brief newspaper story which was the source of the nightmare of disaster which had fallen upon them.

The girl was tired and utterly dispirited. Somehow her tall, graceful figure seemed slightly bowed out of its usual courageous bearing. Her pretty eyes were ringed about, as though, in the absence of observation, she had yielded to her woman's expression of grief. But now, at the sight of the silent, tearless figure at

the stove, she summoned every ounce of her youthful courage to her aid. She moved across the room quickly, and deliberately removed the paper from beneath the yielding arms.

"Must you, mother?" she said quietly, but with a sharpness she was wholly unaware of. Then she added, as she smoothed out the paper, "Will it do any good? You've read the story till—till you're nigh sick. You've read it till I just can't bear seeing you read it any longer. I guess I'll need to burn it, if I don't want to have you set crazy."

But she made no attempt to burn the paper. And all her courage seemed to fade completely out as her mother raised to hers a pair of eyes that were filled with a world of piteousness.

The latter shook her greying head.

"I won't go crazy, child," she said, in a low, monotonous voice. "Give me time, dear. You see, he was my boy. My Jim. He was everything to me. My son, and—and he's gone."

Something stirred in the girl. Something suddenly spurred her. It was an expression of youthful hope, which, in calmer moments, she would have realised was ill-enough founded.

"But has he?" she demanded, almost vehemently. "You don't know. We don't know. You've read that story till you can't read it right. Our judgment's been snowed under in the scare of it. That's so. Sure. What is it? Why, it's just a news story," she cried, flinging scornful emphasis into her tone. "It's a fool news story they love to scare folks with, an' later they'll contradict it without pity for the worry and grief it's caused to the folks who've read it. I've thought and thought, and I tell you it's—it's not real. I don't believe he's dead. Here, I'll show you. I'll read it. You sit there and just listen. Will you? Then you'll see."

She smoothed the paper again, and moved away to the open doorway. Then she read in a strident voice, and commented as she read.

“ ‘Disaster at sea? Urgent S.O.S.’ ”

“That’s the headline, Mum, dear, and there’s a question marked against it,” she cried. “You get that? Even the paper asks the question.”

The girl had looked up. She was urgently regarding the figure at the stove. She was seeking a sign, and seemed to find it in the fact that her mother had sat up.

“Listen,” she went on quickly. “You need to get the words just as they are.

“ ‘The s.s. *Arbuthnot* of Liverpool, bound for Sydney N.S.W., picked up the following wireless on the morning of 27th inst.: “Sailing Ship *Imperial*, Bristol. Steering gear carried away. Cargo shifted. Plates badly sprung. Sinking. Send help. Possibly last twenty-four hours.” ’ ”

Again the girl looked up.

“Then there’s figgers I don’t understand,” she said. “Maybe they’re her position. But you see she’s going to last twenty-four hours. Anything, I guess, could happen in that time. There’s the boats. Maybe if there’s storm it’ll let up. We’ve seen it storm nigh a hurricane on the sea back of here and flatten out in twelve hours——”

The mother shook her head despairingly.

“I’ve thought all that,” she said, in a low voice. Then she seemed to pull herself together for a supreme effort. “It’s kind of you, Claire, to—to—say all this. I know, my dear. You’re feeling just as badly. And you’re trying to help us both. But I

feel it right here," she went on, clasping her bosom with both hands. "He's gone—our Jim. It just wasn't meant for him to get back with——"

"That's fool talk mother, and I won't listen," Claire broke in roughly. "You've thought yourself into that. But there's the rest."

" 'The *Arbuthnot* steamed at once to the rescue. She arrived on the scene at the position indicated. And, though the weather had improved, no trace of the *Imperial* was discovered.' "

"You see, Mum? The weather had improved."

" 'Similarly the *Argonaut*, bound from Shanghai to New Zealand, picked up the *Imperial's* message and hurried to the rescue. She apparently arrived at the given position some hours later. She reports no better success. There was no trace of the distressed vessel, and it is presumed she must have foundered. The best hope lies in the fact that, with the storm abating, and twenty-four hours' grace, the crew of the foundering vessel was able to get away in the boats, although as yet none of these are reported having been picked up. "

" 'The *Imperial* of Bristol is a full-rigged ship of 3000 tons engaged in a West Australian coasting trade. She carried a crew of eighteen or twenty.' "

"No, no, Mum, dear," Claire cried, forcing a smile to her tired eyes. "We mustn't lose hope. We surely mustn't. Why, even the paper reckons the crew must have got away. Just think. Twenty-four hours and the storm quitting. You know Jim. I reckon he isn't the boy to lie around waiting to drown. I'd bet our last cent they got the boats out, and——"

"What then, Claire?" cried the mother, in a

sudden passionate outburst. "I've looked up those figgers on the map. That boat, with our Jim on it, was right out in mid-ocean thousands of miles from land. Think of it, girl, and don't talk foolish. Mid-ocean! Open boats that couldn't stand half a gale! And they're not reported picked up. I tell you——"

But the girl had turned to the doorway. A horseman had just ridden up, and flung out of the saddle. It was Jake Forner, Bad Booker's clerk, and he came straight to the doorway where Claire was standing.

It was a moment of complete reaction. The sight of the broad shoulders of the real estate man's clerk, with his dark, mild eyes, and mild, almost gentle manner, did that for the troubled women which no effort of their own could have achieved. The pressure of despairing thought was flung into the background in the face of the urgency of the thing which this man's arrival heralded. Even, perhaps, because of the enormity of the trouble which had befallen, this man's coming was of greater significance.

The mother remained unmoving. But Claire bravely faced the newcomer with a smile that had no inspiration from any pleasurable emotion.

"How do, Mr. Forner," she said, with a cheerfulness that had seemed impossible seconds ago. "Guess you've come along for my mother's answer. Will you come right in?"

Then she turned swiftly to the woman at the stove. She moved over to her and stood close beside her as though to protect her as the man obeyed her invitation.

"I'm kind of sorry, dear," she said quickly. "I didn't tell you about it before because—because—Mr. Booker offered you \$2000⁰⁰ for that city block he has a mortgage on. Guess Mr. Forner has ridden out for his answer."

Then she looked straight into the man's dark eyes while she went on speaking to her mother.

"It's a real tough proposition," she said slowly, and with all the biting emphasis she could fling into the words. "It's so tough I feel like telling Booker the things a girl 'ud hate to say. The block is worth \$10000⁰⁰ on the market to-day. Which means \$8000⁰⁰ to him. And he wants to hand you \$2000⁰⁰ for it. Are you going to take the money or starve? Which is Booker's pleasant alternative. I guess we need to decide right away."

"Ther's no need for a decision on those figgers, Miss Claire," Jake said quickly, his usually impassive face flushing under the sting of this beautiful girl's words.

"How d'you mean?"

Claire's demand came sharply. It came in that startled fashion which suggested apprehension lest Booker had withdrawn even his usurious offer.

Jake's flush had faded out. He stood just within the doorway, a curiously ungainly figure in his simple city tweed suit which seemed to belong to another world than that of this primitive log home built by folks who had lived their lives in the golden wilderness of the North. His fine eyes were smiling kindly in the manner of one who feels himself to be something in the nature of a ministering, beneficent angel rather than the executioner of the will of an unscrupulous usurer.

"Why, he's reconsidered his prosposal," he said quietly, his smile communicating itself to the rest of his face. "I guess he's sounded the market, and feels he wants to treat you right. Maybe he didn't just remember the exact position of that swell corner block when he made his offer to you yesterday. He knows about it now," he went on drily, "and fancies handing you \$8000⁰⁰ for complete reversion. I kind

of think that's a square deal, Mrs. Carver. Here's his 'brief' to that effect, and the cash, in dollars, is enclosed. You'll just need to sign the deed I'll hand you as a preliminary, and the transfer can go through next time you're along in town. Do you feel like closing?"

There was much more in the man's simply spoken statement than he realised. There was much more, too, in his manner. And somehow the unexpectedness of Booker's change of attitude held Claire silent while she regarded the smiling face of the man who brought the pleasant news.

Rebecca Carver's interest, however, had fallen back before the mother grief which had only been deposed from its supremacy for a few moments. She made no attempt to reply in any form, while her gaze was turned once more to her stove.

Claire suddenly urged her.

"You'll accept, mother?" she said quickly, and the other nodded.

Then the girl turned again to the waiting man who had withdrawn a letter, and the document that must be signed, from an inner pocket.

Claire forced a laugh to her lips.

"It seems queer, Mr. Forner," she said shrewdly. "Yes, surely we'll accept, and mother'll sign. But I'm kind of glad you came. And I'm real glad to hear you say that piece. Especially seeing Booker and I discussed the market value of the block and he was fully aware of its position. I'd make a guess you've somehow had a deal to do with changing his mind. It isn't easy for a decent man to sit around while his boss is trying to rob a helpless woman. I'll just get a pen—oh, you've a fountain pen. Well, mother'll sign right away. And our blessing'll surely follow you on your way right back to the city."

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Jake Forner had departed, and his coming had done more for the two bereft women than either of them were aware of. The paralysing effect of the newspaper story had given place to the reality of things. Grief was still driving them hard, but its pressure had somehow become less devastating, less numbing. More particularly was this the case with Claire.

She was still standing in the open doorway gazing out into the grey light of the dying fall day whence she had passed her "God-speed" to the man who had executed his mission with so much obvious goodwill and pleasure.

Had the girl possessed half the woman's vanity to which she was entitled, she might have understood something of the ungainly man's feelings in visiting her home. But Claire had not as yet discovered in herself that dormant self-appreciation which is so essentially an expression of all human nature. She had learned little or nothing from the faithful, if inadequate, mirror in her small lean-to sleeping quarters. Her wide blue eyes were simply a feature with which to witness the wonders of the world about her, just as her mass of ruddy hair was a something to brush laboriously and to fret over. Her slim, girlish figure she had only learned to deplore in the arduous labours which her life entailed. And its effect upon the men with whom she came into contact concerned her not at all. As yet her woman's charm was a negative factor in her life.

But she was thinking hard as she gazed out upon the grey and russet of the fall world about her. Her gaze was upon the familiar, wood-clad slopes beyond the creek, on which was situated their spent gold claim. The slowly meandering waters that murmured their ceaseless song on the still air helped to impress the loneliness that for the first time in her life had

suddenly made itself felt. And somehow it set up an almost irresistible longing to flee from the sound of it.

For all her brave effort to help her mother she knew her beloved brother had been completely swept out of their lives. The hungry, merciless waters had swallowed him up. She would never, never, never see him again, or listen to his quiet, confident words. Never again would she witness those unobtrusive little acts of devotion which had been so unfailing in their home life with him. No. He was gone out of their lives completely, utterly. It was the end of a long chapter of youthful dreaming. And ahead lay an impenetrable future in which care and responsibility must be shouldered, and hers must be the burden of it.

For a moment something like panic surged in her heart. Before only grief had stirred her. But, of a sudden now, grief receded into the background, a depressing shadow always threatening, whilst a wholly new emotion took possession of her. Her moment of panic passed. Her thought cleared of all confusion, and a swift, keen resolution descended upon her and brought her calmness of spirit.

Claire had far more in common with her dead father than with the gentle woman behind her. In looks, in build, in spirit she was essentially her father's child. Never before had the dead man's qualities had reason to display themselves in her. But now it was different. In her realisation of her sudden responsibilities, the flood-tide of the reckless gambling spirit of her parent poured forth. Her brother Jim, in the same spirit, had fared forth to the uttermost ends of the earth on a bare, almost ridiculous, chance to help them in their need. He had achieved. And only the merciless waves had robbed him and them of the full fruits of his gambler's adventure. Could she sit

down under the misfortune that had robbed them of a well-loved brother, and the fortune he had won for them? No. For all the fall day was closing, with their fortunes at a lesser ebb than the dawn had found them, their need was still urgent. And the spirit of her father was awake and burning strongly in her as she contemplated its reality.

She turned abruptly into the darkening room. Her gaze took in the figure of her mother still bowed under her load of grief. Then it passed to the thick packet of notes lying where she had left them on the table. They represented the limits of their worldly fortune. They were all that stood between them and the starvation Booker had originally designed for them. Her eyes lit, and her spirit suddenly buoyed.

But she turned away and passed quickly into the lean-to sleeping-room that was hers. What was her purpose was of little concern. Her woman's mind was working swiftly, almost feverishly. She stood for awhile contemplating the trifling wardrobe of gowns hanging under a cotten curtain. She examined each garment quickly, urgently. Then, with a gesture that was half impatient, she permitted the curtain to fall back over them, and she moved across to the small mirror before which she was accustomed to brush her hair.

Here she stood for awhile studying the features it reflected. The message it passed her was for her ears alone. Maybe it told her some of those things which everybody but she was fully aware of. Maybe she only obtained a measure of reassurance. Whatever happened in those long, silent moments she turned away at last, and something seemed to have transformed her. Her eyes were alight. Her shapely lips were firmly set. And she passed into the living room beyond. Her whole manner was that of one whose mind is irrevocably made up.

She came to her mother's side and laid a gentle hand on her bowed shoulder.

"Mum, dear," she said deliberately, "we're going to move right into Beacon. It'll set you crazy, and me too, to stop around out here. There's things this place won't ever let us forget. An' we've got to forget. Maybe we're mostly feeling dead now. That's the way grief hits us. But we're both alive, and need to go right on living. If Jim was here he'd decide for us the thing we need to do. He isn't. So—so I've got to think for us both and push it through. We got eight thousand dollars to feed, an' clothe, an' shelter us. Maybe it would do for awhile. But after—what then?"

The mother looked up. It was the questioning of one incapable of anything else.

"What do you mean, Claire? What're you going to do?"

There was no inspiration, there was even no interest in the questions.

"Do? Do?" Claire's reiteration was thrilling with live purpose and something like leaping excitement. "Do? Why, do as Father would have done. Do as he did time and again."

Her strong young fingers unconsciously gripped the soft flesh of her mother's shoulders. Suddenly she dropped on her knees beside the other's chair, while she took possession of the work-worn hands lying in the lap before her. She raised them both to her young lips and covered them with warm kisses of real devotion. Then she held them tightly.

"Mum, dear, we haven't a thing but that eight thousand. Not a thing but that. But there's money, money in plenty in Beacon at the Speedway. Father always reckoned so when things were bad. And he most always found it. I'm going to find it, too, all we want. You know what father used to say. He

taught Jim and me the poker game he played. And he taught us good. And in the end, do you mind how I took his, and Jim's spare cash when they had it? Do you? I do. And do you remember the thing father always said? He said I'd the poker face, and the poker head, and the only luck in the world he was scared to buck. It's that luck we're going to buck, dear. We're going right into Beacon with our dollars. And I'm going to buck the game for all that's in me. Ther's not a thing else for us. True ther isn't. Jim's gone. Our Jim. You know it. And, for all I've said, I know it, too. We've no one but ourselves and my luck to save us from starving in a fierce, relentless world. Are you game, dear? I may do it? Sure I may. I can see it in your poor, sad, tired eyes. Yes. It's that, sure, dear, and you can trust me."

The girl reached up suddenly. It was a moment of supreme emotion. She yielded to it. She caught and held her mother's body in her strong young arms. And then came the flood of tears for the grief that weighed so heavily on both their devoted hearts.

CHAPTER V

EIGHT MONTHS LATER ; ON THE LIAS RIVER

THE dark shadows of winter had long since passed away from the Alaskan world. The almost interminable nights, the pitifully brief days of storm, the cold, the drear that literally eats into the heart and bones of man, these were left a hazy memory to be quickly forgotten, lost in the new season of hope which comes with a generous rush. It was a world released from months of cruel imprisonment.

Just inland from the mouth of the Lias River, where the broad bosom of its stream was lightly stirred by the gentlest of warming spring breezes, a man was at work stowing his stout-built canoe with its cargo of camp outfit. The vessel was moored against a shelving of granite rock. A stout rawhide held it secure to a boulder of ponderous dimensions. For it was a barren, rocky shore without vegetation of any sort.

It was a fierce coast-line, harsh, unyielding and honeycombed with every trap for destruction that the wit of Nature could conceive. Shoals and sunken rocks littered every inlet, and fierce, sweeping currents, and cross-currents, made the smiling waters a nightmare of chaos. Then, behind everything lay those

merciless reserve forces of sudden wind squalls which howled down the mountain slopes without warning, or reason, and blasted the coast line into a churning of fierce tempest.

Pitiless in its treachery this long, tattered coast-line was for the most part completely shunned by man. Yet here, well within the mouth of the Lias River, a whiteman was labouring at his craft, indifferent to the terror of his surroundings.

The man was sturdily built. He was broad and stocky, and stood something less than six feet in height. For all the warming of the clear, spring day he was clad in the thick clothing with which the men of the North are loth to part until the summer heat makes it intolerable. He was a man of something over thirty, with a strong face that was clean-shaven, or was supposed to be, and with a pair of such pale blue eyes as to be devoid of all expression. They were curious eyes, curious in that they revealed not a glimmer of the mind behind them, curious in that their stony expression was unchanging under any and every emotion.

His boat was moored securely, for the tide was asurge and running out to sea. An iron bar, jammed in a crevice in the shelving granite, afforded him his second mooring and left him free to pursue his labours at leisure.

Behind him gaped a rift in the granite wall which rose to a height of several hundred feet. It was obviously the night shelter in which his camp had been made, for, immediately before the entrance, the remains of his fire was still smouldering. Maybe the narrow opening was the entrance to a cavern that widened and heightened, for just such caverns, of every size and shape, abounded in these iron walls.

He worked on till the last of his outfit was securely stowed and the canoe lay deep in the water. Then

he passed back to his camp-fire. For a second or two he glanced about him questioningly. Then with the aid of a slab of stone he picked up the hot ashes and proceeded to dump them into the river. The final clearing was done with infinite care and patience, and even he resorted to the brushing away of the last signs of his fire with a sweeper made of a tied bundle of brushwood.

It was all a little curious. It was all rather furtive. It seemed so unnecessary in this wilderness of a no-man's-land. Yet the man paid heed to the obliteration of all signs of his encampment with as much care as though his very life depended upon the complete covering of his tracks. Finally the brushwood bundle was added to the burden of his canoe, and he cast off his moorings. Then, in a moment, he took his place amidships, and thrust off with the blade of his double paddle.

The little vessel shot out into the tide with a velocity that was almost threatening. But the man was ready and skilful and its nose swung round under the pressure of the dipping paddle, and headed across current making tremendous leeway. Slowly, however, the guiding hand made itself felt, and the bow of the craft headed up into the stream. Later he would have the flood-tide to help him, but for awhile he must battle with a head-stream. That was all right. That was calculated. It was his urgent desire to escape the chances of these dreaded wind squalls which might descend at any moment.

He laboured steadily creeping up the hither shore to avoid the full race of the tide. He hugged the granite walls of the canyon through which the river cut its way to the ocean. The swirling waters revealed the presence of a chain of sunken rocks through which he was threading his way, and only skill and keenness of vision could hope to save him from sheer disaster.

But he pursued his course without hesitation, without a moment of shaken confidence, often dallying with death by a margin of less than inches. And so it went on for nearly an hour.

At the end of that time the change he had awaited took place. The pace of his progress materially increased. The head-pressure lessened. It was then for the first time he permitted himself a glance up at the smiling sky in the direction of the distant hills towards which he was heading.

A sigh of satisfaction escaped him. The sign of clemency he was seeking was there in the perfect cloudlessness. The whole breadth of the sky was a brilliant azure. And, furthermore, the critical moment of slack water had arrived. Now he knew that the hill squalls intended to remain quiescent, and he swung his craft clear of the frowning granite cliffs for the deep waters.

The man's pale eyes were no longer watchful. There was no longer any need. With a great depth of water under his canoe he could drive her leisurely, awaiting the coming flood from the ocean far behind.

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Cy Liskard was lounging in the doorway of his cabin. He was smoking contemplatively while his pale eyes gazed out over the gravelly, trickling creek below him. Near-by, secured to a tying post which was the stump of a sapling spruce, two Alaskan ponies were waiting ready for the long trail into Beacon Glory. One was saddled and bridled. The other was carrying a well-laden pack. Both were sturdy, powerful creatures still clad in their long winter coats.

It was a still, warm day with the air full of the hum of the insect world. The long tails of the horses were swishing with flail-like force to keep the attacking mosquitoes and flies at bay. For the moment the sun

was lost behind frothing summer clouds, while below the dense forests were silent and still with that profound hush which is their prevailing mood.

It was a perfect scene, typical of the greater foothills where Nature permits nothing human to disturb her hush. On every hand hills rose to immense heights, bald of head, but densely clad on their lower slopes with forests of every shade of green. Soft, and gracious, and pleasant to gaze upon, the forests were deep, and dark, and well-nigh illimitable. They were full of preying animal life. And even in the full of daylight the howl of coyote and the harsher bay of prowling timber wolf came echoing down the aisles of leafless trunks.

But Cy Liskard was all unconcerned for Nature's sounds, for Nature's moods. He was by no means condemned to a life-long existence in the world's dark places. He was there by selection, and of deliberate purpose. And his purpose appeared fairly obvious. For there, below him, on the trickling creek, lay the complete, primitive equipment of the gold-seeker's craft.

But for all his expressionless gaze was upon these things his thought was far away, concerned only with its contemplation of the thing which lay ahead at the end of the further journey upon which he was about to embark. As with all the hardy creatures who seek treasure in the remotenesses of the northern world, the joy of return to the cities of men was a passionate yearning that had no limits.

In the two weeks since his return from the mouth of the Lias River his preparations had been completed. And they were more considerable than might have been supposed to be necessary. This was his home for the time. This was his hunting ground. It was an uncharted, unregistered gold prospect. And as such it was open to invasion or any chance discovery that

might completely rob him of any proprietary rights he might claim. So his preparations had been made carefully, and in a fashion best calculated to safeguard his interests.

Now with the last detail worked out to his satisfaction he had abandoned himself to a contemplation of the good time which he intended Beacon Glory should yield him. And for all his pale eyes gave no sign, the mind behind them was full of smiling anticipation. He was thinking of the burden of gold on the pack-saddle, and of the balance of credit at Victor Burns' bank which he knew to be lying there in his name. He was thinking of the wine to be bought at Max Lepende's "Speedway." Of the orgy he intended to buy there. He was contemplating the glitter of the place, and the seductive charm of the women with whom he would dance. Then there was the great game with its never-failing lure. And the thought of this last was bound up with the vision of a young girl, beautiful as a dream, with flaming hair, and eyes whose colour seemed to change with her every mood, now violet, now blue, and sometimes almost sea-green. He had only seen her once, but memory had never let go of the vision. This time he was determined his memories of her should be more intimate, whatever the price to be paid.

He abruptly bestirred himself, and a sound escaped him that was like a laugh. But his harsh face and baffling eyes gave no sign. He turned and fastened his cabin door behind him. Then he moved across to the ponies patiently awaiting his pleasure.

He passed round them quickly, feeling the cinchas of both. The pack was secure, but his own saddle required tightening up. He raised the legadero of the saddle and pulled mercilessly on the knotted strap. Then he kicked the grass-fed belly of the docile creature to make the tightening closer. Finally

he dropped the legadero to its full length and prepared to mount.

As he did so a blaze of sun shone out from behind the summer cloud-bank, and the man looked up with something like a start. For a second he gazed without blinking, and his brows depressed as though the sight of the sun offended him. Then he glanced away, and followed its beam where it threw his own shadow absurdly foreshortened on the ground. In a moment he had raised his foot to the stirrup and swung himself clumsily into the saddle. And, snatching up the rawhide quirt hanging on the horn in front of him, he slashed viciously and needlessly at both horses.

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The Occidental Exchange Bank was empty of all customers. It was in the middle of the afternoon and the time just before the mild rush which usually came about closing time. The place was a relic of the earliest days of Beacon Glory, and, unlike most institutions of its kind, it had remained un-rebuilt as the city grew. But the fact was Victor Burns had realised the unstable qualities of the first boom, and been content to await developments. So the place, although substantial enough, was small and of no visible consequence for all it was the city's principal banking house.

Burns was at the counter which completely cut off all approach to the premises behind. It was well gridded with substantial iron of a mesh that would have puzzled any gunman to negotiate. It was a grid which had been designed out of wide experience. For bank "hold-ups" had been a somewhat favoured pastime in the city's history.

The banker was talking to his principal teller, a man who looked almost too young for his position. But what he lacked in years he made up in physique.

He was a youthful athlete, virile and smilingly self-confident.

"What's she paid in this morning?" he asked, in the quiet fashion of simple business interest.

The youth smiled.

"Why, a mere two thousand dollars," he said with a shrug.

"Kind of a quiet night, I guess," Burns returned, without any responsive smile. Then he folded his arms on the counter, gazing out of the half-open door which was held back by a chain that could be released from behind the counter. "It's queer," he said. "That girl hadn't more than two red cents back of last fall. And now—why, now she can handle more stuff than I've collected in twenty years. And she handles it right, too, that kid. They reckon she's collected all the luck in Beacon. Well, I'd say she's collected most of the business brains with it." He laughed. "And she's still buying city blocks."

"And swell gowns," added the teller with a grin.

"Well, I'd say she wouldn't be the dandy girl she is if she didn't. Say——"

Burns broke off. A pair of rough ponies had come to a halt outside. They were in full view through the open doorway.

"Cy Liskard," he went on after a moment, as he beheld a man fling out of the saddle. Then he nodded at the gold scales. "Guess we'll need them, sure. He's a big gold winner."

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To a practical student of human nature like Victor Burns, Cy Liskard was of more than common interest. He had come into contact with him in business, and in business only. But, in consequence, he saw the man in his most interesting aspect. For, in his understanding, a man's business was the best channel

through which to discover the real depths of his character.

He had come to know him as one of the many individual gold men of the remoter places which radiated about Beacon. The first time he had encountered the man was just after winter had closed down, when he drove into Beacon with a curious, mongrel team of three utterly inadequate dogs, hauling a home-made sled which bore a goodly burden of raw gold-dust of excellent quality. He had come straight to the bank and weighed in his treasure. The transaction had been made with the customary simple formalities, and the man's credit had been duly opened. At that time Cy had only revealed himself to the banker as a surly, silent creature who had none of the reckless buoyancy of the men who usually came in to sell their dust.

He had promised, at that time, a further consignment later in the winter when travelling was good, if he were able to purchase a really reliable dog team to replace the disreputable bunch that had at last succeeded in bringing him in.

Victor had ventured a little frank talk on receiving this opening. He had complimented the man on his strike, and the quality of his gold, and had inquired if there were other prospectors in his neighbourhood. It was then he realised something of the man with whom he was dealing. The baffling eyes were raised to the banker's. They looked, or rather stared, coldly and hardly into his, while he negatively shook his head.

"Ther' ain't a guy around my layout but myself—and ther' don't need to be," he said with a snap of his square jaws.

It was the quiet tone of threat in the final words that enlightened the banker to that which lay behind the man's mask-like face, and he had made no further effort to interest his customer.

Since that visit there had been another about mid-winter. The man blew into the bank on the swirl of a blizzard that lasted for three days. At that visit his credit had been more, much more than trebled. And now had come a third trip into the city, and Burns was deeply intrigued.

The man thrust his way in through the doorway bearing two lashed bundles, one under each arm. They were large and obviously of considerable weight, and his movements were swift almost to hastiness.

It was to the banker's thinking an unintentional outward sign of his relief at the safe completion of his journey, and the final depositing of his treasure.

"Howdo, Mr. Liskard," he greeted the man, as he laid his bundles on the edge of the counter. "Made a good trip in?" Then he smiled on the two bundles. "You look to be good an' busy on your patch." He turned to the teller who was looking on interestedly. "The scales, Rickards."

"Tain't bad on the trail this time o' year," Cy admitted, with more than usual readiness, as he cut the lashings of his burden with a vicious-looking sheath-knife.

The banker watching him noted the details of his powerful body under the thick pea-jacket that was closely buttoned over it. He watched the rough hands, with thumbs stumped short in their top joints, and with the flattest, shortest, ugliest nails he had ever seen, as he ripped the bonds asunder. Then his gaze lifted again to the hard face, with its dirty stubble of beard and whisker, clearly unshaven on his journey. And his shrewd mind was swiftly estimating. He reckoned, by the growth of whisker, the man must have been on the trail at least three weeks, if he had started clean-shaven.

But the two bundles were open, and the canvas bags tied at their necks were revealed bulging with

their precious contents. In a moment the banker's interest became absorbed.

"That all dust?" he asked quickly. Then he added: "Some stuff there—sure."

Cy nodded without speaking. He cut the fastenings, and passed the bags through the grid which Burns had flung open.

"Weigh it," he said.

The man's voice was harsh, and his demand sharp, and the banker passed the bags to the teller at the scales.

No further word passed while the youth manipulated the weights. And Cy watched his every movement with an intensity of concentration that brought his dark brows closely together over his curious eyes.

The gold was emptied into the scale, which only took a portion of one bag. The teller noted the weight and emptied the scale into one of the bank's own leather bags. Six times the scale was filled to overflowing while the silent men looked on at the dull, red-yellow of the gold this man had brought. It was dust and nuggets, but mostly nuggets of splendid proportions.

Cy Liskard was leaning on the counter with folded arms. And when the weighing was completed, and the teller bent over his task of working out the sum, he drew a deep sigh as though in relief that his task had been completed.

Victor looked up at the sound.

"Kind of makes a boy glad to get it safe into the bank. In these days of 'hold-ups' around Beacon it's jumpy play toting a bunch of dust around. Say, that's swell stuff. Good an' red, like the stuff the boys collected on 'Eighty Mile' years back. I haven't seen that colour anywhere around Beacon till you hit along with your bunch last fall. Are you registered?"

Cy's gaze was withdrawn from the moving pen of the teller.

"Not on your life."

Burns raised his eyebrows.

"That's taking a chance," he demurred. "Aren't you scared folks'll jump in on you?"

The man made a sound like a laugh. But his face was unmoving.

"Not a little bit," he said roughly. "I guess ther' ain't a guy in Beacon with the guts to get out to the creek I got staked. If he'd the guts he couldn't make it. An' if he made it he'd fergit wakin' when the daylight come around. No, sir. I ain't registered, an don't figger to. I ain't handin' a map of my strike to any cursed official. I ain't handin' the story to a deaf mute. I got my patch, an' I'll keep it. I nigh sweated blood to locate it. Register, an' half the world would get right on my back. I'll take all the chances, an' God help the son of a mule who gets within a mile of it. What's the tally?"

The teller read out the figures in a tone of wonderment his youth could not conceal.

"Eighty-two thousand dollars and twenty-five cents," he said, and passed the figures to his chief for verification.

Cy nodded, while the banker examined the paper.

"That's about my reckoning," he said. "I'll be totin' another bunch along when I'm through with my summer wash. I'll just draw a dope of ten thousand right away. Here's the brief." He passed a cheque across the counter and waited to receive the money.

Burns looked up.

"Yes," he said seriously. "That's the reckoning, sure. I congratulate you. You certainly have a swell claim."

Cy nodded.

"I certainly have," he agreed shortly.

The teller passed the roll of bills, and he and his chief watched their customer bestow it in a hip-pocket. As he did so he revealed a heavy gun strapped about his waist, and Victor, at least, realised it was there as no mere ornament. Cy had said "God help the son of a mule who gets within a mile of it," and somehow this watching student of human nature realised that "God's help" would certainly be required in the circumstances. This man was not the sort to stand at trifles.

Cy took his departure without the least ceremony, and it was only the banker's "So long" that forced common politeness from him. They saw him mount one of the two ponies outside, and they heard the coarse oath with which he urged the weary creature forward. Then came the sound of the heavy slash of a quirt, and the horses clattered away.

"A mighty tough proposition," Burns laughed quietly. "All the gold in that boy's claim wouldn't tempt me to try and track him to his hiding-hole. I guess he comes out of the mountains. An' maybe they're somewhere across the border—seeing he's not registered. Well, there it is. Guess it's no worry of mine. We're here to collect gold, and I'd say we've collected a swell bunch from that boy."

The teller laughed.

"Guess there's certainly little else to collect from him anyway," he said significantly.

CHAPTER VI

A BUNCH OF HUMANITY

It was the day of celebration at the Speedway. It was the anniversary of its first opening, and Max Lepende had ordained that once a year high revel should hold sway in commemoration of the foundation of his fortunes. The Speedway was to Beacon Glory what the Casino is to Monte Carlo. It was perhaps a good deal more. But then Monte Carlo is in the eyes of society and Beacon Glory had somehow contrived a position on the map more or less unrecorded. On the whole the "Glory" citizens, as they loved to call themselves, were well enough satisfied with their position. It was convenient for many reasons, not the least of which was the feeling of security it gave to most of them, and the general immunity they enjoyed from the legitimate consequences of offences committed against society in earlier life.

Max, being of Italian extraction, and flamboyant in temperament, had built and designed in the manner that most appealed to him. The place was literally a Bacchanalian temple, lavish with white and gold and brilliant lights. It was gaudy with red furnishings and glittering glass. And, generally speaking, was as good an example of a whited sepulchre as the

riot of debased human passions, and the lavish brush of the decorator, could make of otherwise perfectly innocent woodwork.

The place stared out on the city's main thoroughfare two blocks below the Plaza Hotel, a wide-fronted, be-pillared edifice of two stories. In the brilliant summer sunlight its whitened walls looked dispiritedly grey and shabby. But in the dark months of winter its blaze of electric light transformed it into a lure which the people of Beacon Glory found impossible to resist.

Max had named it "The Palace of Pleasure." But then Max wore a pointed beard which concealed a pair of full, red, something sensuous lips. Furthermore, he wore the rest of his hair long, and a large, flowing black cravat adorned the evening clothes he always appeared in when presiding over the nightly orgy obtaining in his establishment. Beacon Glory, being frank, apt, and unashamed in its downrightness of phraseology, had promptly dubbed it "The Speedway." And, in the end, the ultra artistic mind of its founder had to yield, and as the "Speedway" it was known throughout the length and breadth of southern Alaska.

Max's annual celebration was not lightly to be missed. And, generally speaking, Beacon Glory was not given to missing anything at other people's expense. Besides, Max would be offended if his available customers absented themselves on this his especial night. Then, too, why should it be missed? There would be a dinner of exceptional quality in the grand dining hall—free to invited guests. There would be a flood of wine of the best quality. The company, for once, would smoke the best cigars, and lap up expensive, sticky cordials. And it would all be free. Oh no. There was no missing it by those men favoured with an invitation

There would be no women at the dinner. That was where Max displayed his fineness of discrimination. He knew his men. And perhaps his women—some of them. The women would be there for the dance afterwards. They would be given a good time. But Max sternly demanded that this, his evening of evenings should start—fair. Whatever the later developments, the night should at least start with such dignity and decorum as an assorted line in evening clothes could impress upon the manhood of a more or less disreputable out-world city.

The Plaza was unusually full in the late afternoon on this day of celebration. The weather was hot and windless and the spring mosquitoes were merciless. But the open verandah, overlooking the main avenue, was liberally patronised. Mosquitoes were part of the daily life of Beacon Glory, and their worst torture was insufficient to disturb its citizens out of their routine.

Jubilee Hurst and his partner Burt Riddell were amongst those foregathered. They were nominally gold men of the type which is drawn from the big cities of civilisation. They come at the call of adventure and easy money, and in the end generally seek the latter by means of an active application of wit rather than of muscle. Then there was the well-liked, amiable, and indifferent Doctor Finch, Beacon's leading man of medicine. He was reposing his rotund figure in a chair of doubtful stability, tilted at a perilous angle, while his heavily-booted feet decorated the rail of the verandah. Abe Cranfield, the Plaza's esteemed proprietor, short, stout, and with a thrusting chin whisker, was squatting on a low stool many sizes too small for him. And, reposing comfortably in a prolonged cane deck-chair, with a Rye highball on an adjacent table easily within reach, reclined Victor Burns of the Occidental Bank.

None of them had as yet disguised themselves under the uniform required for the evening's entertainment to which they were all invited. That was an evil they preferred to postpone till the last minute. They one and all preferred to remain the plain examples of Beacon's citizenship they really were as long as possible.

The irrepressible Jubilee Hurst made no pretence of his reluctance. And he was airing his views with that simple freedom which he claimed as his right at all times.

"You know, boys," he said, smashing a bunch of mosquitoes on the back of his bull-like neck, "Max is mostly a decent citizen for all he's a Dago. But his craze for patent shoes and hair oil gets me all the time. You know there's no sort of reason in a guy acting the way he does behind a bow-tie fit for a Dago revolutionary; and wearing a sheath knife on his hip fit to carve up whale blubber. Maybe with an elegant souse in prospect he fancies us boys fixed the way he gets us because most of our party suits were invented before the possibilities of the hip-pocket were guessed about. I'd say the Speedway's no sort of joint to fall into without a whole darn arsenal of weapons lying around to your hand most all the time. And, I'll sure be feeling like a lamb at slaughter time settin' around disguised like a first class waiter, while he belches up his annual hash of the pleasure it hands him having us suckers around, and how grieved he is the cemetery's added to its stock of fancy mausoleums by way of advertising the amenities of his darn booth."

He smiled aimably round upon the company, and took half a highball at a gulp. And his black, twinkling eyes finally settled on his partner's long and grievously unsmiling face

"It's all right, boy" he said, grinning genially.

"You needn't to feel the way you're lookin'. I got two boiled shirts, and, seein' you're a partner of mine, I'll share 'em with you for haf a dollar."

Burt raked at the calf of one hairy leg exposed about his sock suspender to the attacking mosquitoes.

"Oh, beat it!" he cried irritably. "You wouldn't miss a thing the Speedway could hand you, if Max reckoned to have you around in your underpants. You make me tired." He turned to the banker. "I got around the 'Glory Hole' this morning. It's burnt out stark."

The banker sipped his highball and gazed thoughtfully out at the far hills.

"I'm glad," he said, quietly, after a moment's deliberation.

It was coldly said, and Abe Cranfield looked round at the speaker quickly.

"I can't say I'm glad for any feller to get burnt out," he exclaimed warmly. "The Aurora bunch are acting mighty gay. Wher's it goin' to stop? Is it the Plaza or the Speedway next? How am I to know when I'm offending their notions? Clancy Roscoe had been runnin' his saloon since ever Beacon started. I can't see——"

"It was a brothel." Burns spoke sharply. Then he laughed quietly. "See, here, Abe," he said, in a conciliatory fashion, "I guess you hold a brief for Clancy and his Glory Hole because he's in your line of business—as far as liquor's concerned. You sort of feel its interference with lawful liberty. And, maybe, that way you're right. But there's no right-minded boy to this city'll feel that the Clan has done anything but a service to the credit of our burg. Clancy was warned. He showed me his written warning two weeks back, and he was right up in the air. And his warning was straight and right. It said: 'Clear out your women and run your liquor

joint straight.' It gave him two weeks. Well, he refused. And I got my notions of the feller who makes his pay out of that sort of thing. He banks with me, and I can't help it. But I'm glad his shanty's gone, and there are some more I'd like to see treated the same."

"Sounds like he was the Chief Light of the Aurora," laughed Jubilee.

Burns nodded.

"Maybe it does, boy. But think back to the days when you were your mother's kid, and you'll think like me. No. I guess there's a worry back of that Clan, but not when they burn up joints like the 'Glory Hole.' "

Doc Finch nodded over his cigar stump.

"I'm with you, Victor," he said seriously.

"I'm sure you are, Doc."

"Well, what of Max's show?" Abe was still considering possibilities from a personal point of view. "What of the women there? Are things better there when you get right down to bedrock? Say, I want to laff. Ther's vice to the square inch right around that dance hall 'ud pave hell a furlong a minute. But then Max could buy half the city," he finished up bitterly.

"I can't stand for that," the unsmiling face of Burt was suddenly transformed. He was grinning, but in real earnest. "The Speedway's the thing folks make it," he said hotly. "It's the only real joy spot in a city that's forgot how to laff. You can help yourself to a portion of life there without a meal ticket. Ther's light and laughter there if you don't get around with a grouch. You can burn money there, or make a bunch, if you're bright enough to beat the other feller. Ther's women who're foolish, and women who ain't. And ther's boys who're a real imitation of men, and hogs disguised under a

bank roll. If the Clan was to get after Max's joint it 'ud be me for the coast and the first barge for the south. No, Abe, if ther's any sort of method back of those guys in their white shirts and pointed sky-pieces you and Max can sit around without a worry. An', anyway, this bum hotel couldn't have claim to vice, even in the dreams of a bughouse inmate."

Jubilee chuckled as a preliminary to one of his characteristic outbursts. Then he took in the whole company in his expansive, headlong way.

"Burt's got a hell of a hunch, an' I won't have to charge him haf a dollar for that shirt," he laughed delightedly. "My, Abe, but he got you plumb in the pit of the stomach. And he was right sure. I guess you can throw all the dirt you fancy in Beacon without ever a chance of missin' things. But the Speedway ain't available for that play without hurtin' folks who're mostly your friends. What 'ud we do without the Speedway? Why die plumb to death setting around your verandah, smashin' skitters. I can't think of dying worse."

The grin died out of his eyes, and a curious sort of earnestness replaced it as he went on.

"No, Abe," he said, sitting up abruptly and spreading out his lean, tenacious hands, which were carefully manicured. "Get a grip on yourself and think of the women-folk who get glad there at night. Do you grudge 'em? No, sir, you don't. You couldn't. It's not in you. You know a woman hasn't a swell time in life when you think about her. And in Beacon she wouldn't get any time at all." He laughed again. "We're told the first woman was made out of man's 'scrap.' Maybe that's how it comes she's had to put up with man's 'left-over' ever since." He shook his head. "To my thinking woman's never had a better time than a yaller pup ever since she disappointed her folk with her sex. It seems to me

a poor sort of life fixing a man's hash so he don't take too big a chance on his life policy. Think how she needs to smile every time a feller hands her out five cents to make vacation on, same as if she was pleased. Chores seem to be the limit of woman's joy in life, and I guess she'll go right on chasing kids' noses with a swab till she jerks up at the graveyard. She'll keep on trying to feed her whole bunch on the change out of a dollar, and the promises her man hands out to her like dead leaves in the fall. She's got a hell of a life, even if it's only she's expected to swallow a man's lies whole, and sit around foolish waiting for 'em to come true. No, Abe, don't you ever go for to rob her of a moment's pleasure. She'll mother you sick, and mother you well. She'll lie for you, and fight for you. And when she's broke her heart keepin' folks from lynching you, she'll tidy you all she knows and pass you into the crematorium in the hope of making you a real sanitary proposition for the first time in your darn life. Ther's all sorts of 'em find joy in the Speedway. Some are foolish, but," he finished up, turning his perfectly serious eyes in the direction of the great dance hall "there's those who —aren't."

At that instant a raucous honk! honk! echoed down the wide, dust-laden, unkempt thoroughfare, and every eye was turned in the direction.

Out of a dust cloud a high-powered automobile raced down towards them, rolling and bumping over the perilous unevennesses of the road regardless of every consequence. It was painted a curious rich red, a big saloon body with black running gear and black roof. It contained only two women, both expensively clad, one of whom had a wealth of red hair that seemed to match the colour of the vehicle. Every man on the verandah was craning. Every eye was watching the car's reckless progress. And as it

passed, leaving them almost lost under a fog of dust, it was Doc Finch who, returning his feet to their resting-place on the verandah rail, voiced something of the thought that occurred to the mind of each.

"No," he said, smiling amiably round on the company. "There's no gang, or clan, or bunch of disorderly toughs in Beacon Glory that 'ud dare to do harm to the Speedway so long as St. Claire Carver is its patron saint."

The banker nodded prompt agreement.

"That's a cinch, Doc," he said. "She's got every man in Beacon just where any good woman could want him."

Abe concurred promptly if grudgingly.

"She's a real dandy, an' a good spender," he admitted, "and she's got the whole fancy of Beacon as well as its luck——"

"Luck?" Victor Burns drained the remains of his highball to wash the dust of the automobile from his throat. "She's made a pile that would set some of the Wall Street guys screaming. Say!" He laughed. Then he became serious. "And talking of gold and things," he went on, "there's colour coming in just now from outside. A boy bought himself a credit at my place this afternoon for eighty thousand dollars odd. And it was the sort of dust they used to collect on 'Eighty-Mile' years back."

The banker watched the almost electrical effect of his words on a company to whom gold was the beginning and end of everything. Discussion of the Speedway and its morals, and even of its beautiful patron saint, was forgotten. Every man at once sat agog. And even Jubilee Hurst, who was mainly a sheer gambler, who had been gazing down the avenue after the now vanished automobile, eagerly sought information.

"Where did it come from?" he asked, without hesitation or scruple.

Burns shook his head.

"Search me," he said with a laugh.

"Who's the guy?" demanded Burt.

"Guess I'm a banker."

"Can't you hand us a thing?" inquired Abe.

"Not a thing but just that," Burns said quietly. "It's the third big bunch of dust come in from the same place, by the same boy, in six months. And there's more coming. I wanted you fellers to know about it because it's my job to collect the stuff, and the more folks know about it the more they'll worry to get after it. There's big gold coming into Beacon, and I guess that's the best news you——"

He broke off. Ivor McLagan had appeared in the open glass doorway leading on to the verandah.

"Say," he cried after a moment's pause. "I hadn't a notion you were in town, Ivor."

Jubilee laughed.

"You ain't much of a guesser, Burns," he interjected. "Why wouldn't McLagan be along in? Is he missing Max's show any more than you and me? But say, Mac, tell us about oil. We just been hearing gold from Burns, and now we want oil. The oil king is right with us, folk. He's right in our midst," he cried, with his ready laugh. "The soft yellow stuff gets us all the time, but nice, black, sticky oil's only a short cut to it. You're the guy to grease the wheels of Beacon right. Gold won't be a circumstance when you open out one of your gushers. Sit around, man, and hand us news that'll help us digest Max's Dago feast right. Talk to us of options, and borings, and coal mountains, and all that sort of truck you can't eat, and I'll buy you a highball right now, and swear to set up a swell piece by way of epitaph on your mausoleum when you've got mired to death

in the juice you're going to flood Beacon with. You're our only hope of——"

"And a darnation poor one, Jubilee," McLagan interrupted. "That is, right up to now." He pulled up a chair and leaned his great body over it, while his plain face smiled indulgently on the irrepressible man who never failed to amuse him. "But we're right on oil. We've hit a—trickle. A hell of a fine—trickle."

Abe sat up.

"Is that right?" he demanded, his eyes lighting.

Ivor nodded.

"It surely is, Abe. You'll be rebuilding this hog pen in a year's time, and you'll need to add a hundred rooms."

Burns leant forward in his chair.

"Is it going to be big?"

"A real flood—if I'm not foolish."

"Will you talk to-night at Max's feed?" inquired Doc Finch, a staunch believer in publicity.

"Not a whisper."

"Why not?" inquired Burt Riddell.

"Because I got a deal too much that's worth saying," McLagan laughed. "The only time it's safe to talk is when you haven't."

Jubilee chuckled appreciatively.

"I'm buying that highball right away, Abe," he cried. "And make it for the whole darn house, if it's my last buck. McLagan's right. Don't shout till you want. Then shout like hell. Folks'll hand it you, if it's only to keep you quiet while they shout. Oil? And it's coming? Are there any options lying around? Are we to be in on the ground floor, Mac, or, is the darn door bolted and locked?"

McLagan shook his head.

"Sure it's locked, and I've hidden up the key," he said quietly. "My prospect's a tight one. You see,

it's been a long trail and I'm taking no chances. Easy money's fine for those who make it. But I'm not passing easy money to a soul. Guess I'll go and clean up for Max's party." He laughed pleasantly. "And I'll collect your highball on the way, boy. So long."

CHAPTER VII

THE SPEEDWAY

MAX LEPENDE, for all Jubilee Hurst's estimate of him, was a creature of unusual mentality. His ability was quite beyond question; his morals were something of a less buoyant nature; while his poses were wholly Latin in their extravagance, and contrived to set up an impenetrable armour against those who sought to discover the real man underneath.

The Speedway was the reality of his own dream. Its inspiration was a product of memories and experiences of early life in a land of beauty and an atmosphere of bygone glories. And as such it was a sufficient anachronism in its present setting to grip the imagination of the crude minds which made up the clientele he hoped to pillage in the outland territory he had chosen for his hunting ground.

He boasted the refinements of his designing, and was mercilessly jealous of the Speedway's fame. The attitude of other minds was less benevolent towards it. The citizens of Beacon Glory were prone at all times to downrightness, and, consequently, they set no halo about the place. But they delighted in the licence it afforded them for indulgence in pleasant surroundings.

The fronting colonnade of five gaudily decorated pillars meant nothing to the citizens of Beacon Glory. Yet they sometimes marvelled at the costliness and the extent of the white paint that looked so drab in the sunlight. Some never even paused to consider the rich carpetings they trod underfoot in the gaming rooms, or the wonderful block-flooring over which their heavy boots glided in the great dance hall. But there were few enough who failed to appreciate the raised private boxes which lined the walls of the latter, furnished as they were with drinking tables, and deeply upholstered chairs and divans, and hung with curtains to be drawn at will. Then there was the glitter of innumerable mirrors, and the broad-staircase with its carved balustrade leading to the rooms above, where every game from "crap dice" to "baccarat" could be indulged in.

The general run of the men and women of Beacon Glory demanded a good time. And the Speedway, under Max's consummate guidance and absolute control, provided for their every need in this direction. Oh, yes. Max saw to that. For underneath his patient, smiling veneer, and his pose of polished respectability, he possessed a hard, unyielding, astute commercial soul, greedy for the last cent of profit he could extract from his customers.

Hardened trail men, no less than educated men from the cities of culture in the outer world, yielded to the seductions of the Speedway. So did the women, who regarded it as a part of their daily lives. The charm of subdued lights in the gaming rooms; the dazzle and glitter at the gilded bars and in the dance hall; the subtle, rather sickly perfume of the place, the value of which Max so perfectly understood; these things all contributed to make it a veritable temple for the spiritual debasement of its devotees.

On the night of its birthday the Speedway was

swept and garnished to the last degree. Fashion and custom was no less strong in Beacon than in the more enlightened dwelling-places of humanity. Every visitor to the place would be clad for the occasion. No woman would dare to appear for the festival without some sort of a new gown. And as for the men, knee-boots would be taboo, and heavy working shoes were under the ban. Every man who was accustomed to resort there would be raiding the shoe store the day before, and, failing evening suits as part of their wardrobes, certainly only the best they possessed could be tolerated.

It was truly a splendid function and possessed all the outward display with which humanity loves to hide up the wealth of moral blemish to which it is unfortunately and unfailingly heir. The place was super-heated and the air was heavy-laden, and Max, as he welcomed his customers and guests, radiated smile, and perfume, and punctilio without discrimination.

Jubilee Hurst, observing him after enduring his own portion of the formalities at the foot of the great staircase in the central hall, realised to the full the delicious mockery of it all. He whispered his comment to Ivor McLagan, who stood beside him, clad in the well-cut evening suit that was anathema to his downright soul.

"You know, Mac, there's a heap to Max of the feline species. He's a mitt on him that 'ud shame velvet, and a tongue to match, and I feel plumb sick in the pit of the stomach, and like handling a newly-hooked eel, when I get near enough to listen to his fancy dope, and feel the tips of his polished fingers in my hand. Get a line on him bowing around to folks of whose bank-roll he's made his life's study. See his Dago antics. You'd guess he loves us all to death, while all the time he's out for plunder like any 'hold-

up' that ever flagged a western express. And we're all grinning back at him to schedule. And we're all saying a piece we've sort of learnt by heart from years of repetition. Can you beat it? No. I'll eat his darn feed an' likely get full up to the back teeth with the liquor he's going to hand out. But to me it's simply the change out of the dollars he's collected out of my wad over a long period of darn foolishness. It isn't a thing else, unless it's to say I'm just one of the mutts of life mired at the wrong end of things, an' can't afford to act diff'rent."

McLagan smiled.

"Don't worry a thing, boy," he said easily. "It's just the game of things we've all of us got to play more or less as we beat it along the trail to the crematorium. I'd certainly say Max don't need showing a thing. I want to laff."

But for all the bitterness of spirit the Italian's antics might have inspired in those who saw through the mockery of it all, the whole comedy looked to be playing out as the master-mind had designed. It was ordained that the gathering at the Speedway, on this one night in the year, should be a vivid landmark impressed upon the minds of the city's people, from the banquet to the invited guests, to the ball, and the great gamble that would later take place at the tables. There would be impressive decorum for just as long as decorum could be maintained. And after that, circumstances, and the proprietor's tact, and, failing that, his powers of other persuasion, would deal with every contingency that arose. There would be nothing allowed to occur on that occasion calculated to besmirch the record of the place. That was Max's purpose. A purpose from which he had no intention of departing.

The banquet was over and the company had

dispersed in such directions as individual inclination prompted. Max had thrown his annual shower of verbal bouquets, and had drunk in the responsive adulation and laudatory expressions which custom demanded from his guests. The courses had been disposed of by healthy appetites which refused to be disguised, and an excellent brand of champagne had flowed in no niggard measure to lubricate faculties that were easily enough set in motion for full appreciation of the night's riot. The ballroom was already thronged with dancers of every grade of ability, and the lure of the tables had claimed their devotees. While not a few were sufficiently attracted by the magnetic glitter of the bars where the white-clad bar-tenders were under orders to dispense of their best mixtures without charge.

Ivor McLagan and some of his friends had passed over the attractions of everything else for the shaded lights of the poker hall. It was a spacious apartment with panelled walls of dark green to match the colour of the baize-covered tables. It was carpeted thickly with oriental reds and blues, and such woodwork as there was was gleaming white. The tables were spaced evenly round the walls, with one, only, somewhat larger than the rest, occupying the centre of the room. The place was entered from a landing just beyond a wide, decorated archway hung with curtains, and this, in turn, gave on to the head of the great staircase.

It was a room with which little enough fault could be found. For, apart from the charm of its shaded rose lighting, it was governed by a number of unwritten laws so that its company could pursue its devotions without let or hindrance, or any disturbing element. The chip bureau was presided over by a seemingly voiceless autocrat, while velvet-footed waiters ministered to the thirst of everybody in the efficient

manner of well-drilled club servants. It was all admirably calculated to yield the best possible profit out of a mixed company which consisted of men and women of substance and undeniable beauty, down to the rough-clad trail men who sold their "dust" for chips, and a gambling fraternity of every shade of colour and almost every race.

Outwardly it was a sheer delight for those who were sufficiently young and reckless. It was a place to grip the imagination. Inwardly, or underneath its surface of pleasant seeming, there was perhaps a different aspect. There was not one of the immaculate waiters who was not a trained athlete in his ability to deal with the toughest human violence, and each man was fully armed with an automatic pistol or some other lethal weapon. Then the voiceless president at the chip bureau was a dead shot, and had under his fingers a system of switches which could summon any aid he needed, and close every exit of the establishment, at an instant's notice.

McLagan had made no attempt to cut into any of the games that had already started. For the moment he and the rotund Dr. Finch and Jubilee Hurst were onlookers. Jubilee was sitting on an unoccupied table, while the two others were smoking Max's cigars, watching the game in progress at the next table.

The doctor and Jubilee seemed more deeply interested than was the oil man. A poker game was irresistible to Jubilee at all times. Doc Finch had partaken of a sufficiently good dinner to find interest in anything, provided it was witnessed from a comfortable chair. But McLagan's attention undisguisedly wandered to the curtained entrance every time the hangings were drawn aside to admit a newcomer.

He was a keen poker player, but only as a pastime. And he rarely drifted into any of the really big games that were played at the Speedway. Just now he had

no desire at all to participate in any of them. He was by no means a part of the Speedway's human freight. But for months, now, he had never failed to spend his evenings in its scented atmosphere when business demanded his presence in the city.

Jubilee shook his carefully-oiled head in response to McLagan's challenge.

"No. I'm not cutting in yet," he said. Then he added with a grin, indicating the table in front of them, "Guess I couldn't make a one-night hotel bill out of a bunch like that. See that guy open a fi' dollar jack pot, an' throw in at the first bet? They're a close bunch, without the nerve to buck four aces right. I'll wait for the Saint."

McLagan's quick eyes shot a sharp look into the grinning face.

"She plays a great game," he observed quietly.

"Game? It's a gift," Jubilee chuckled. "If she'd take me partner," he went on with meaning, "we'd clean up half the world."

McLagan removed his cigar and dropped its ash into the fixed tray provided on the table on which Jubilee was sitting.

"Have you put it to her?" he asked smilingly.

The other shook his head.

"Not on your life, Mac," he said seriously. "I'm sure like every other guy around the way I feel, but I've a sight too big a respect for a good woman to want to tie her up to the kind of life I live. Maybe sometime I'll make the pile I mostly dream about, and I'll be able to quit the game I've always run. Well, when that time comes, and I've learnt Sunday School ways, I'll be feeling and acting pious. Maybe it 'ud be different then. Say, Doc's doping off his feed."

"You're wrong boy." The Doctor bestirred himself. "But likely enough I was dreaming. I thought I heard you talking of acting—pious I——"

He broke off. The curtains had been abruptly drawn aside from the great archway. Two of the waiters were holding them back. Suddenly there was a curious hissing sound somewhere up in the shadows about the domed ceiling. The next moment a fierce light flashed out, filling the archway with the white-circle of its beam. It was a "spot lime," and it fell on the tall, slim figure of a beautifully-gowned girl as she appeared from the landing beyond. It was Max's greeting, on the night of celebration, to the beautiful Saint of his beloved Speedway.

Just for an instant Claire Carver stood dazzled by the glare of the unexpected light. Every eye in the room was turned in her direction to discover the meaning of the terrific blaze. And in that moment Ivor McLagan feasted himself upon the vision he had been awaiting.

The girl was clad in an expensive sort of semi-evening gown of soft, black material, aglitter with the shining surfaces of a myriad of black beads. At her waist was a large, sprawling artificial flower that matched the ruddy tone of her vivid hair. She was without gloves, and her rounded arms of alabaster whiteness were bare to the shoulder, and her gown below the knees revealed sheeny silk stockings which terminated in high-arched insteps and exquisite shoes. But her glory was the hat adorned with flowing Paradise plumes, and the wealth of her hair framing a face whose beauty set the pulses of the gazing man hammering.

Never in his life had McLagan seen Claire a creature so exquisite. And there flashed through his mind a memory of the girl of the headland, tortured by the threat of Bad Booker's usurious terms. The change, the complete transformation, was amazing. There had been change before. He had seen it and delighted in it. But there had been nothing like this. This was

the girl's party gown. He understood that. She was——

“God o' my fathers!”

Jubilee breathed his astonished admiration into McLagan's ears, and was promptly silenced by a look.

Somewhat embarrassed Claire came down the room with heightened colour, and eyes that smiled almost shyly. It was the same sweet face which McLagan had always known. Only it lacked something of that natural freshness which the wind and the sun of the coast had bestowed upon it in her days on Lively Creek. The downy bloom of those days had been replaced by a suggestion of powder. Even her pretty lips seemed to have gained added ripeness from the careful touch of cosmetic. But the wide blue eyes, the even brows, and the rounded, perfectly moulded cheeks were the same, and, to the man's thinking, even more beautiful.

But some of the delight McLagan felt as the girl came quickly towards him passed at once as he beheld the figure of Max close behind her. Many a night he had looked on at the centre table where Claire always played, and had even found amusement in observing the crowd of men of all conditions who never failed to gather like moths about a candle flame. He had watched them in their frantic efforts to win her ready smile, and it had filled him only with added pleasure in her beauty and simple charm.

But the sight of Max at that moment, with his sleek, dark head, and his carefully-cut close beard, his immaculate clothes, and his good-looking foreign face, inspired a feeling he had never before experienced. He remembered the method of this girl's entrance. The elaborate staginess of it. And he realised that Max had not designed an entrance for the most popular gambler in Beacon Glory. No. It was for the woman herself. And Max was rich,

and powerful, and without scruple. And, furthermore, with immense resources for achieving any purpose upon which he set his mind.

Anger rose behind the man's keen eyes, and their usual easy humour was changed to a glitter that had nothing mild or yielding in it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN FROM THE LIAS RIVER

THE little burst of applause which greeted Claire's entrance had died out. Like the stage light that had descended upon her it had left her with a slight feeling of embarrassment. But she understood that the men, at least, if not the women, were in the mood to applaud anything and everything, for it was a night of festival. It was the first of its kind she had attended. She had known by tradition what was expected, and had seen to it that she played her part. So her gown was the most expensive she could import from Seattle and the largish, beaded hand-bag she was carrying was packed with a roll of money of unusually large proportions.

In the brief eight months since Claire had plunged into the vortex of the Speedway's gaming life she had become a victim of the fever of it all. Her original purpose had been the simple betterment of her fortunes, and those of her mother. She had desired nothing more. For, in her heart, she had no sympathy with the reputation of the place. The whole idea had been cold business. But by degrees her viewpoint had changed, and the rich youth in her had gained ascendancy. The place, the life, the

game, swiftly took possession of her, and all of the dead father latent in her young soul had stirred to an irresistible passion. The lure of that centre table she had made hers, the rattle of the chips, the feel of the delicate pasteboards in her nimble fingers, were all things she had come to live for. She had learned to love it all with a real passion.

In the process of time there had been scarcely a moment of disillusion. Her beauty had gained her a deep place in the hearts of the men. And the women, whatever their real feelings, bowed before a creature whom the other sex had set on so exalted a pedestal. Then her skill; her spirit. At the realisation of these things even the women stood by in frank admiration, while her amazing good fortune filled them with superlative envy.

Claire had been staunch and true to herself and her purpose. Never once had there fallen a lapse. She eschewed the vices she witnessed in others of her sex who haunted the place, while she gave full run to her capacity for sheer enjoyment. Never once in the thirsty, heated atmosphere of the place had she permitted any beverage more harmful than a mineral water to pass her pretty lips. She revelled in the scent of the tobacco with which men and women filled the atmosphere. But she had not the slightest inclination to essay the mildest of cigarettes herself. Then, too, she had swiftly discovered herself to be possessed of an unerring instinct in defence against the ardent and often crude advances she was constantly encountering amongst the wild youth with which she found herself surrounded.

She had been dubbed "The Saint" from the earliest days of her career at the Speedway. And it was a natural enough appellation. Her given name had suggested, and her methods had inspired. It was the jealous minds of her own sex which had coined

the designation. And the manhood of the city had taken it up in real affection.

Before passing to her table Claire came over to the seat where McLagan's great figure was lounging. And her greeting of him had in it no lessening of their old friendliness.

"Why, Ivor," she cried, "I didn't guess you'd be along in town. This is real fine on a party night. And—and—" Her lighting eyes surveyed his evening suit, "—say, don't you look swell? You see, I always sort of expect you in your tough old pea-jacket."

The man's plain face was alight with undisguised pleasure. He shook his head, and his small eyes twinkled.

"Don't just say a thing, Claire," he said quietly. "If you knew the way I feel I guess you'd hand me all the pity you know. I'm hating myself under a boiled shirt, but I had to be around to-night anyway. And I'm glad. I'd have missed that dandy gown of yours else, and the picture you're looking. You've got Beacon plumb dazzled and me well-nigh blinded."

The girl flushed and laughed, but she left his compliment unanswered.

"Are you going to sit in at my table?" she asked; then, with real sincerity, "I'd be glad."

But again McLagan shook his head.

"No, Claire," he said reflectively. "I got other notions being here to-night. Besides," he added, with a smile, "my bank-roll isn't equal to better than 'table-stakes,' and that's no sort of use when *you* get busy. I'll just sit around awhile. There's Jubilee yearning to lighten your wad. He sat right in on the jump when you came along, and I don't fancy he'll squeal when you're through with him. No. I'm waiting on Victor Burns, and one

or two boys. I can do business here, and—I've pleased Max coming."

Claire glanced round at her table and her eyes were no longer smiling. Her table had filled with the men with whom she was accustomed to play, and they were waiting on her pleasure.

"Why must you please Max?" she asked, a little sharply. "Why is it all of you men reckon to please Max?" Suddenly she lowered her voice and inclined towards him. "He's gone off to the dance hall so I don't mind. I'm getting to hate him like I used to hate Booker months back. That play of his just now with his light. It sickened me. It surely did, Ivor. And he's getting like a tame cat. And I hate cats. Give me a dog all the time, and a good, rough, fighting trail husky at that."

McLagan nodded. His eyes were smiling inscrutably.

"Don't worry with him," he said. "Don't worry with any feller. Max has his uses, which don't need to concern you. But your boys are looking gun-play my way."

Claire laughed. The man was dismissing her. This big, burly, plain creature who had persistently asked her to marry him. Just for a moment a sense of pique disturbed her, but it passed immediately, lost in her laugh. There was no other man in that room who would have done the same. She nodded at him and took her dismissal.

"Swell clothes hide up all sorts of things, I guess," she cried, as she moved away, "but it's queer how the rough in a man can leak through. I guess those boys at the table won't be in such a hurry to lose me."

She was gone. And with her going a sense of loneliness at once stole in on McLagan. He desired her for himself. He desired Claire Carver above all things in the world. He could cheerfully have driven

the crowd about her table headlong. But that was the feeling that was his at all times at the sight of the men who gathered about her. However, he had come there with a resolve from which he would not deviate, and, in accordance with that which lay at the back of his mind, he had dismissed her to the game which he knew was her passionate delight.

Victor Burns had just passed the curtained archway, and hard on his heels was a newcomer who at once claimed all McLagan's interest. For a moment he observed the man while the banker strolled leisurely over towards him. He was a broad, powerful creature in dark clothes, with a pea-jacket tightly buttoned over his chest. His face was clean-shaven and dark, but his eyes were of the palest hue of blue, and as expressionless as those of a dead codfish. It was his eyes that interested McLagan most, and Burns came up almost before he was aware of it.

Burns laughed.

"Hello, Mac, where are the boys? Busy? You seem to be having all sorts of a time to yourself. I'll hail a flunkey an' collect a cocktail."

McLagan edged round towards the empty chair which the banker took possession of.

"Nothing for me, Victor," he said brusquely. "Jubilee's in the game there, and the Doc's oozed off to get a look at the dames in the dance room. Abe's passed back to his own booth, and young Burt Riddell's sitting in where his game can't butt in on his partner's." He laughed. "We're outside it all, eh?"

"I surely am," the banker admitted promptly as he surveyed the crowd. "You can't run a bank and play big money at the Speedway. Say——"

He broke off as he caught sight of the man with the pale blue eyes thrusting his way unceremoniously through the crowd about Claire's table. McLagan followed the direction of his gaze.

"Who's that tough-looking guy?" he asked quickly.

"Cy Liskard," the banker said. "He's a client of mine. And he's full to the back teeth with dollars and dust. And," he added slowly, "looks like he is with liquor, too. Guess he's out for a time. He'll get it if he sits into the Saint's game. She'll skin him to death."

The stranger's movements were rough and forceful. He made no pretence. The crowd where he joined it about Claire's table was at least three deep. It was composed of men in every fashion of clothing, and women whose faces were sufficiently disguised under paint to hide up the worst traces of ageing and dissipation. He shouldered his way through and came to a halt immediately behind one of the players. McLagan wondered at the ease, the impunity with which his purpose was accomplished.

"He's a roll of ten thousand in his hip-pocket, and I can't say how much more. I wonder the kind of game he's got lying back of those dead eyes of his."

Burns spoke reflectively, but his companion made no answer. McLagan had bestirred himself out of his seat. He had perched himself up on its arm, the better to view the scene. His gaze was on the stranger and was swiftly reading the thing that must have been obvious to any onlooker sufficiently interested. The man was clearly under the influence of drink, but by no means drunk, and his "dead eyes," as Burns had called them, were fixed in a devouring stare upon the girl at the far end of the table. It was not the game that claimed the man. No. It was the girl, who remained utterly unconscious of his regard, lost in the absorbing interest of the hand she was playing.

"You know, Mac," Burns went on, after a moment's contemplation of the man, "there's faces with features that mark a man down in a feller's reckoning,

and leave him with an opinion that he's no right to on the face of things. But his feeling generally proves right in the end. That boy's eyes leave me cold in the spine." He laughed. "To me they're the eyes of a dead soul. To me they're the eyes of a feller who'd better have been smothered at birth. I'd hate——"

He broke off. Above the murmur of voices with which the room was filled the tones of a voice jarred harshly. It was Cy Liskard. And he was speaking to the man behind whose chair he was standing.

"I want to cut in right away," he was saying. "Ther's fi' hundred dollars for your chair, Mister. Does it go?"

McLagan had straightened up from his lounging attitude. Burns, too, was on his feet. And both had moved nearer to the table. Five hundred dollars offered for a "cut-in." It was sufficiently extravagant. And every eye of those standing around was on the stranger who made the offer.

A few moments passed. The hand came to an end, the pot passing to the man whom the stranger had sought to buy out. Then there came movement, and the player's voice made itself heard.

"Hand us the dough," he said sharply. "You can cut right in. If you've the nerve to bid five hundred for a chair I guess you're more entitled to it than me."

He rose from his place and Cy Liskard dropped into it. Then he made his way through the smiling crowd.

"Fifteen hundred dollars for six hands leaves me at peace with the world," he said, as he approached McLagan and the banker. "Ain't that so, Mac?" he asked with a wink.

He stood for a moment looking back at the table

and his smile of self-satisfaction suddenly faded out of his eyes.

"I'm kind of sorry I fell for it, though," he said, lowering his voice. "That guy's haf soused, and I've let him into *her* table."

"Maybe it's just as well you did, Soo."

Soo Tybert stared at McLagan wonderingly. He was a burly youngster, partner in a dry goods store, and hailed from his father's wholesale house in Seattle.

"How so?" he asked.

McLagan shrugged.

"He meant cutting in anyway."

Burns smiled.

"I guess the Saint's going to have a swell night," he said. "Mister Cy'll be along in the morning to replenish his dollar reserves. Can you beat these boys who come easy by the stuff lying around the creeks? Haf a highball under their belts, and the good air of the hills blown out of their vitals, and they're as ready to pass on their stuff as an elderly, new-made widow-woman."

But McLagan and the dry goods boy were paying no heed to the banker's reflections. They were talking earnestly, in a low tone, and when they had finished Soo made a somewhat hurried departure.

"Where's he gone?" asked Burns, when McLagan returned to his side.

"To hunt up Max."

"Why?" The banker's keen eyes had sobered, and a sharp look of doubt accompanied his interrogation.

McLagan indicated the table at which Claire presided.

"What d'you know of Cy Liskard?" he asked curtly.

"Not a thing. He's a customer at the bank. That's all. He's on pay dirt and hit it good."

"Where?"

"Don't know."

Burns shrugged. But the look in his friend's eyes interested him.

"There'll be trouble before the night's out. I'm going to stop around."

McLagan's words came sharply, but in a tone only meant for the banker's ears. There was a curious hard set to his plain face, and his small eyes were coldly bright. Victor Burns held him in deep regard. And his understanding of him was the understanding of years of intimate association. He had long since probed McLagan's interest in Claire Carver, and made his estimate of it. And now, as he observed the man's hard-set look, he realised something of the depths to which he was stirred.

"You don't need to worry," he said quietly. "There's no man around here to-night crazy enough to play tough. Not to-night."

McLagan's reply came with cold conviction.

"Ordinarily I'd say you're right, Victor. But ther's mischief back of that feller's eyes. He paid five hundred to cut in. Why? For a hand at poker? Not on your life. I'm going to get in and watch the game."

McLagan was far too familiar with the poker games played at the Speedway to concern himself with the bigness of the game he was looking on at. It mattered little enough to him the relative value of the heavy red, white and blue chips. Their value might be twenty-five, fifty, and one hundred calculated in cents or dollars. It made no impression whatsoever upon his imagination. But the skill of the players was a never-failing source of interest. The human psychology in the game was fascinating beyond words.

To him the young girl, who seemed literally to have

given up her life to the lure of the game, was the epitome of all that was demanded of human nature in the play. Her beautiful face smiled or remained serious as mood inclined her. But no change in it was wrought or influenced by the progress of the game. Her mood seemed at all times buoyant. And her flashes of inspiration came and passed without a moment of apparent effort or hesitation. In three hands she had her opponent's measure with an instinct and observation that was unerring, while she played her own hand with the baffling inconsequence which only a beautiful woman could achieve. The values of every hand, estimated through her understanding of her opponent's methods, were instinctive knowledge to her, and she played on the instant at all times, while her skill in the draw proclaimed her utter and complete mistress of the game.

A hand had been dealt since Cy Liskard had sat in and the anti had remained unchallenged. Now a jack-pot was being dealt for. Claire's smile was good to watch, and a light of deep absorption was shining behind her beautiful eyes. She dealt the hand, and sat waiting for the opening or passing of the jack-pot.

Jubilee shook his head and closed his cards up. The next man refused. Cy Liskard picked up some chips and counted them.

"I'm opening for 'fifty,' " he said, while his curious eyes levelled themselves at the dealer. "Guess that calls a hundred."

The hush was profound. The onlookers foresaw a big gamble if all the table came in. Then again it might be a crude bluff on the part of this man who was almost a stranger to them.

McLagan was observing the man with almost cat-like watchfulness. Victor Burns was smiling interestedly, wondering the while how long his customer would last in the hands of these skilled and

merciless gamblers. To him there was, there could be, no doubt as to the end. This man would stand no chance. He would stand no more chance than a lamb in the midst of a wolf pack.

Of the six players at the table Jubilee alone refused to come in. He threw his cards in and sat back while Claire began to deal for the draw. The betting started at fifty dollars, and the spectators' interest deepened, for, after the draw, all but Claire and the man who had opened the pot threw in their hands.

Claire's instant response to the stranger was a raise to five hundred dollars.

It was the sort of thing expected of her, and interest deepened. Cy Liskard had drawn two cards, and the smiling dealer had matched his draw. There could be no indication as to what either of the players held beyond the fact that the man had opened the pot.

Cy's response was slower in coming. He glanced at his cards and closed them instantly. Then, in a moment, he raised the girl's bet by one hundred dollars.

McLagan never for an instant withdrew his gaze from the man. For it was the man who interested him. It seemed to him the dead eyes had somehow come to life, under the purpose driving him, and he was endeavouring to read and grasp that purpose. To McLagan it was a face masking completely every sign of emotion, but he felt that emotion was burning deeply behind the lustreless eyes, and somehow the conviction of lurking evil was irresistible.

Victor Burns, like all the rest around the table, had eyes only for the beautiful woman, with her graceful figure a-shimmer with the twinkling beads of her gown, and with her wealth of vivid hair under her modish hat framing a face which he was never tired of gazing upon.

Claire smiled her prompt reply, her lips parting and

revealing a row of perfect teeth as she "saw" the bet and raised it another five hundred. The challenge was thrilling and on the instant every eye focussed on the man at the end of the table.

He raised his strange eyes and gazed hardly into those of the girl. And as he passed his chips into the centre of the table McLagan drew a sharp breath.

"Curse it, ther's your fi' hundred, an' another on top of it. Will you see it?"

"Surely. And raise it." Claire's retort came in tones of smiling, unruffled calm. "It'll cost you a thousand more."

The man laughed. But the laugh was harsh and unconvincing in its lack of mirth.

"I like it in thousands," he cried, as the girl's chips were slid into place to swell the pot. "There's your thousand and another. Well?"

There was a shuffling of feet amongst the spectators and several coughed. It was an expression of the wave of excitement surging.

"Perfectly well."

The girl matched his bet and raised it another hundred. And the man laughed again with a further challenge.

"It'll cost you another thousand," he cried, and his tone was exulting.

Victor Burns found himself holding his breath while he waited for the girl's move. Just for one instant her eyes flashed out of their usual calm. There was real excitement in them now. And he wondered if at last she had been caught out of her depth.

"And more," she said. And her voice was perfectly steady. "One thousand more."

Her chips had become exhausted and she thrust forward a roll of bills. Then she sat waiting for the man to come again.

It was the supreme moment when the test of nerve

was at its highest pitch. The onlookers understood. Big game as they were used to witnessing at this centre table it was the first time they had looked on with stakes rising by a thousand dollars at a bet. The question in every mind was the same. The man was obviously a gold man with a pouch full of dust. What was its limit. How far would he go under the influence of the surroundings, and the liquor he had obviously consumed.

Cy Liskard clutched his cards and laughed harshly.

"Come again," he shouted. "There's your thousand an' another."

He literally flung the bills on the table, for he, too, had exhausted his chips. "Ther's nigh fifteen thousand in the pot. Can you see it an' raise it? Raise it. Raise it—if you've the grit."

"Sure I will," Claire replied with just a suspicion of sharpness in her tone for all her smile. "Come again, mister man. Let's see your colour. You haven't the stuff in you to raise that. It'll cost you fifteen hundred."

The girl's breath came quickly for all her self-control. There was challenge in her tone, a woman's taunting. But to McLagan, who knew her every mood, there was more. In his mind he questioned her nerve if the man came back at her, and he edged his way nearer, and his instinct was to support and strengthen her in the weakness he fancied she was beginning to betray.

He reached her side and her opponent was forgotten. Just for one instant her pretty eyes flashed a smiling upward glance into his plain face. And a wave of relief surged through his anxious mind. Her eyes were full of the confident courage he had feared for.

"It's good enough!"

Cy Liskard threw his cards on the table face downward.

"It's yours, my lady. I'm done."

A gasp of astonishment came from the onlookers. The man's defeat, his weakness, left them amazed. Then, as Claire reached out and collected the pool, short and sharp came Jubilee's challenge.

"Your 'openers,' Mister!"

Cy Liskard turned his unsmiling eyes on the man. His gaze was cold for all the harshness of his response.

"What the hell!" he cried.

Then he reached towards his cards and sought to turn them. In doing so he displayed all five. Perhaps it was intentional. Perhaps, in a fury of resentment at the challenge in his defeat, the thing was inadvertent. Whatever it was the revelation was complete and a gasp of amazement greeted his action.

He had thrown in *four aces*!

A chorus of derision followed. There was laughter. There were epithets of undisguised contempt for the play that could yield four aces so tamely. Even Claire smiled her contempt at her late opponent while she thrust her own cards deeply into the remainder of the pack. There was only the straight flush to have beaten that hand, and the man had parted with something like eight thousand dollars.

The comments of the onlookers remained unheeded. The man's dead eyes were on the woman opposite him. He seemed oblivious to all but the smiling contempt in her eyes.

"Say, ain't you satisfied?" he demanded, a curious note underlying the harshness of his tone.

Claire laughed derisively.

"Sure I am," she cried. "I'm always satisfied with easy money. Guess I'm ready to take all that's coming, even from a feller who's fool enough to throw in four aces. The deal's with you, Jubilee."

She turned to her grinning neighbour, who was shuffling the cards, but the man at the end of the table was not yet done with.

"Say," he cried again, and his tone matched the frigidity of his soulless eyes. "Ain't ther' no change comin'? I handed you better than eight thousand dollars. Guess you didn't win that pool. I passed it you. You didn't bluff me a thing. Eight thousand couldn't scare a feller with my wad. No, sir. You're queen of this lay out, and I don't seem to yearn for any lesser dame. You got eight thousand a present. An' ther's fi' thousand more fer a dance. Guess that's what you're here for, ain't it? Here's the stuff. I'm out to buy. It's right up to you. Well?"

The coldness of it was icy. The brutal purpose consummate. The man was in liquor, but it was no drunken proposal. It was considered and confident.

A hot flush swept over the girl's beautiful cheeks. It dyed her fine brows right up to the roots of her no less vivid hair. Then she smiled, and her eyes glittered. She shook her head.

"You're drunk or crazy," she said. "I don't know where you come from. I don't even know your name. But I guess you best get back to the dirt you scratch your gold out of. It's the only place for men like you."

Claire spoke quietly. But there was that in her words and tone that was indescribable in its utter contempt. Cy Liskard withdrew the bunch of money he was grasping with a jerk. He stood up. And his cold gaze passed swiftly over the crowd of faces watching the scene. Then his eyes came to rest again on the beautiful creature he so obviously coveted. And dull fury looked out of them.

"You b——!"

But the filthy epithet was smothered. A man's

great fist crashed it back into the foul throat that had inspired it. Cy Liskard reeled. He fell backwards against the chair from which he had arisen. And when he recovered himself he was looking into the muzzle of a heavy automatic pistol, with the fierce, narrow eyes of Ivor McLagan behind the weapon.

"You swine! Beat it! Beat it right out of here or I'll send you plumb to the hell you belong to! Push up your hands, darn you! Push 'em up, an' beat it!"

But the man made no attempt to obey. His pale eyes stared back into the fury burning in the engineer's. His hands remained by his sides.

Those looking on realised the thing about to happen. There was movement and scurrying as those in other parts of the room scrambled out of the line of fire. This stranger man was looking on death, calmly and without yielding. Another moment and——

But in that moment an amazing thing happened. It almost seemed as if by magic the room had become peopled by a small army of ghostly, white-robed figures. They came in a sort of wave through the curtained archway through which Claire, earlier in the evening, had made her triumphal entry. And they swept down upon the gold man from behind in the voiceless fashion of avenging spectres.

It was all over in a moment. Cy Liskard was engulfed in the white wave that rushed upon him. There was a moment of confused, voiceless struggle. Then the white-hooded spectres had vanished as they had come, and McLagan returned his heavy weapon to the hip-pocket of the evening clothes he so cordially detested.

Cy Liskard had been spirited away by the white-clad Aurora men. And almost on the instant the momentarily interrupted game was resumed amidst

a chorus of laughter and eager comment. Nothing could be allowed to interfere with the Speedway's routine. Even matters of life and death were of no real concern comparable with the success of Max's annual festival.

CHAPTER IX

THE AURORA CLAN

IT was brilliant moonlight. Millions of stars were shining on the velvet of the heavenly dome. But their sheen was dimmed against the vivid spread of moving colour that lit the northern horizon. In the cloudlessness of the night the mysterious blaze of the Aurora had transformed the hours of darkness.

It was somewhere beyond the city limits where the plain rose gently towards the distant, surrounding hills, and the open gave place to wide bluffs of forest land. The scene was set in a spacious clearing, with a wealth of spruce and poplar and jackpine rising out of the tangle of undergrowth encompassing it. And somewhere about its centre stood an aged Western cedar, which looked to belong to other latitudes, other climates.

The cedar was a forest giant of immense proportions. It stood out in the splendid twilight black and overwhelming, for all its height was dwarfed by the lofty, tattered crowns of its aloofly respectful neighbours. It formed a wide canopy of shelter beneath its far-reaching boughs, matted with their manifold carpet of curious foliage. It was a shelter admirably suited to the ghostly scene being enacted beneath its shade.

Twenty white-robed, white-hooded figures stood in an unbroken circle at a point where the wide-flung boughs were at their greatest spread. Right above them, almost exactly bisecting their circle, a monstrous bough reached out supporting a dangling, rawhide rope which terminated in an ominous noose. Within a foot of this noose, gazing squarely at it, bound hand and foot, stood a whiteman prisoner.

For the moment complete silence prevailed while Cy Liskard's pale eyes surveyed the thing with which he was confronted. He was sober enough now, and there was no lack of understanding in him. He knew he was the victim of no play game. For even he, comparative stranger as he was to the life of Beacon Glory, had heard of the doings of the men of the Aurora Clan.

He had offended. He realised that. He had offended these self-appointed custodians of the city's morals, and he was searching acutely the doubtful chances confronting him.

His cold eyes passed over each silent figure in its white cloth gown. He sought to penetrate the conical hoods which enveloped each head, masking it completely and falling generously upon the shoulders. And all the time he was aware of the ugly thing which hung precisely at the level of his neck.

The futility of his search quickly impressed itself upon him. Bound fast, he was completely helpless. These people had left him with sufficient freedom to stand erect, but that was all. At length the silence, his own impotence, and the hideous threat of the dangling rope got the better of his none too generous stock of self-restraint. He stirred, and sought to twist his powerful arms free under their painful bonds. Then of a sudden his voice rang out sharply, harshly, in a characteristic challenge.

“ Well ? What the hell—next ? ”

There was fury in his challenge. There was a shadow of something else in its violence. And as the sound of it died away the silence of the night came back at him, filling him with a sense of his own utter helplessness.

A few moments later one of the white figures stepped out of its place in the circle. It came forward and halted before the hanging rope. It raised its arms and took possession of the noose. And when the rope was finally released the captive realised that the noose had been considerably widened.

Then the man stood a pace back and made a sign with outstretched hands. He beckoned in two directions. And, in a moment, the captive was seized from behind and securely held by his bound arms.

Putting forth a tremendous effort, Cy Liskard sought to free himself. It was quite hopeless. And the effort, as a result of his bonds, only cost him his balance, and, but for the support of his captors he would have fallen to the ground.

The prisoner was no longer under any illusion. The thing about to happen was obvious, and the silence of it all suddenly drove panic surging. The man in front of him had again possessed himself of the swinging noose. He approached slowly. Then, in a moment, the rope was placed over the prisoner's head and rested loosely upon his shoulders.

The figure withdrew at once to the tree-trunk. And a moment later the noose drew sharply tight about Cy Liskard's bull-like neck.

With the tightening of the noose the last vestige of the prisoner's self-restraint vanished. He cried out. And his whole impulse was for blasphemy and vituperation.

“ Name of God ! ” he cried violently. “ Cut this adrift if you're men and not swine. What have I

done? What d'you want? Gold? If you're 'hold-ups' I'm ready to pay. You've got me where you need me. Turn loose your lousy tongues. If you cut this gear adrift ther' ain't a man amongst you 'ud stand up to me two seconds."

A voice replied to him. It sounded muffled, and hollow, and far-off as it came from behind the mask of the man at the tree-trunk. But to the prisoner it came in welcome relief. For it was the first human voice he had heard since his capture.

"We want nothing from you, Cy Liskard," it said. "We aren't out to rob dead men. You're about to be dealt with according to the laws of the Aurora Clan."

The voice seemed to fade out rather than to cease speaking. Then the controlling figure at the tree-trunk gave a further sign. The two men standing ward of their prisoner withdrew on the instant, and with a jerk the rope tightened viciously about the prisoner's neck.

The man writhed under the sudden pressure. He struggled fiercely. But every effort he made only caused a further tightening of the rope. In panic, and complete and sudden despair, he ceased his struggles. And on the instant the rope relaxed, and the muffled voice came again.

"Your struggles are useless," it said. "There's no escape from the Aurora Clan. Our men are everywhere in the city, the valley, the forest, the plain. If you broke from us now you'd be recaptured within an hour. Our purpose to-night is simple. To-night you die—unless you swear never to return to Beacon Glory. If you swear that you'll be freed at once, and your goods and ponies will be handed back to you here and now. There's no alternative. No woman in Beacon will ever be insulted by you again. We'll see to that. Remember, if you ever return to

Beacon your death will be instant. You can choose. You've two minutes in which to do so."

The ballroom was a blaze of light. The raised boxes about the walls were crowded with resting couples refreshing themselves at the expense of their host. The band, which was more brazen than seemed necessary, was blaring out a fox-trot with a haunting melody, which seemed to be the joy of the heart of the uniformed man behind the slide trombone. The softer strings were almost drowned under his super-human efforts, and even the notes of the cornet were hard put to it to obtain a hearing.

The dancers were many, and various in their methods and appearance. There were dress suits in evidence among the men, and the women's garments ranged from prodigal scantiness to redundancy. There were burly men and fat. There were lean creatures who looked to spend their days on short rations and hard work. While the women appeared, as they ever do to the casual onlooker, a rainbow spectacle of femininity pleasing enough to the masculine eye careless of the details of their variegated costumes.

Doc Finch was amongst the stouter dancers and his partner was only little less ample. They looked comfortably hot and in no danger of foot entanglement. Jubilee was striding vigorously with a good-looking woman whose beauty owed much to her gown and the careful application of facial make-up. Bad Booker was smiling over the shoulder of a young thing who was frankly absorbed in the joys of the dance without regard for the company she was keeping. While Jake Forner, his chief clerk, was straining every nerve to keep pace with a woman whose efforts suggested gymnasium training rather than terpsichorean. He was perspiring freely, and a far-off look of troubled concentration gazed out of his student's

eyes, leaving it a matter for speculation as to when the breaking point would be reached.

It was a scene of real and comparatively decent human revelry. Outwardly, at least, its decorum was complete. The night was still young enough for the human nature gathered there to retain possession of the cloak of seeming which the occasion imposed. It was a *bal masque* without its phantasy of costume.

Claire Carver and Ivor McLagan were in possession of one of the boxes. The waiter had just deposited a tray of refreshments on the table between them. True to her fixed rule the girl had ordered coffee and a savoury sandwich. But the oil man had no such scruples. His refreshment was a Rye highball.

Claire had abandoned her game immediately after the discomfiture of the stranger gold man. The thing had startled her out of her usual equanimity. Trouble of one sort or another was by no means new to her. But in her eight months of the life of the Speedway it had been the first time she, herself, had been subjected to downright insult. She had always understood the risk she ran. Her mother and friends were always behind her ready to remind her if in her more generous moments of happy optimism she should chance to forget. But for all that the shock had been no less, and for once she had been glad enough to accept the company of the man who had so promptly defended her, and turn her back on the shrine of the temple at which she worshipped.

McLagan read through the mask of levity she was endeavouring to impose upon herself. Out of his love and great sympathy his pity had promptly leapt. It stirred him to her further aid. And so he had gladly availed himself of the mood that had made her laughingly appeal to him for the dance she had refused to the man who had so grossly enriched her.

They were talking now as they rested, watching

the antics of the buoyant crowd moving rythmically to the brazen efforts of the band.

"You know, Ivor," Claire said smiling but reflectively, "those white fixed folk get me scared to death. It's the first time I've seen them close up. Once before I saw them, or thought I did. I was out in the automobile. And I kind of thought I saw a bunch of them move off the trail ahead of me in the dusk, and hide up in the bush. I wasn't sure. But I was scared enough then. It's queer. How—how did they know to-night? How did they come along right on time? Was it Max on the 'phone? I didn't see Max around at all. Say, does he run them? Are they sort of his police? They scare me. I was glad enough to see them get around. You see, that feller didn't put his hands up to you when you had him covered. But I sort of feel we don't just know where we are with such a gang operating."

The girl was gazing down on the moving crowd while she voiced her apprehensions, and the man was left free to feast his eyes on the picture she made in her beautiful gown and the hat that was so perfect a crown to the wealth of vivid hair beneath it. He was smiling happily in the reward her presence bestowed upon him for his efforts in her defence.

"It's kind of queer, Claire," he said, and there was that curious harshness of tone which he rarely seemed able to avoid. "But some way I don't feel it's for you to be scared a thing. If this gang is what it's reputed I'd say it's only the folks with unclean minds and ways that need to be scared. But there certainly are things calculated to set folks worrying the way the Clan learns and acts when things are wrong. I don't reckon Max has a thing to do with 'em. Though you never can tell. I was talking to Max when we came down. I allow he's quite an actor. But—well, if he was acting it was mighty

clever. He was raising hell to learn how those folks got in on his precious Speedway."

The girl turned from the scene that so entertained her.

"Was he?" She shook her head. "He's got a head as long as—as the body of that girl dancing with Burt down there," she said with a laugh. "He's not going to give himself away. I'd say he's a great bluff when he feels like it. You know I'll have to quit the Speedway or——"

"Or what?"

McLagan's eyes were no longer smiling.

"Or marry him."

The girl's smile had passed. Her eyes were no less serious than his.

"You mean that?"

McLagan was leaning across the table with his hands supporting his plain face. He waited while Claire sipped her coffee and nodded over her cup. Then he went on deliberately and almost harshly.

"You can't. You mustn't. You shan't."

He was stirred out of his usual calm. And Claire's gaze lowered before the hot fire she beheld leap into his eyes.

"He's wealthy," she said slily.

"And he's like a tame cat. The creature you hate."

Claire set her cup down and laughed happily.

"That's no argument," she cried.

"Argument?" McLagan shook his head. Then he added significantly: "If you want argument I can give it you."

"Not that sort," Claire warned him sharply. "I have your promise. But I'd like to hear any other—from you."

The man sat up. He leant back in his chair and gulped down half his highball. His moment of

unrestraint had passed. He was smiling again, but a feeling something approaching bitterness laid hold of him that Claire would tolerate only his friendliness. He gazed into her face and smiled. But he was yearning with a passion that well-nigh devastated his sternly-controlled composure. He shook his head.

"No, Claire. You mustn't marry Max," he said. "You know him as the actor he is. I know him as he really is." He leant over the table again. "Say, I wouldn't marry a she-wolf to Max."

"Why?"

McLagan shrugged.

"Leave it at that," he said brusquely. "Here, kid," he went on quickly. "You're right. You must quit the Speedway. Quit it all. It's not for you. Don't you see? Oh, yes. I know. The folks are good to you. Sure they are. They're mostly men, and you're a swell girl that sets them crazy to be good to you. But it's all on the top. There isn't a thing underneath but the ordinary muck of human nature. You're going to get it sometime when I'm not around, if you keep on. And there's sure no need for you to keep on. I——"

"But there is." Claire's interruption came sharply and she held up a warning finger at the threat of storm she again read in the man's hot eyes. "Here, Ivor. I said plain argument. Listen. I'm making money in bunches. Big bunches. I need the money. And I love the game. But someday I'll need to quit. I know that. But it won't be till my luck breaks, or—Max turns. If Max turns first I'll need to get out quick. No. I'll never marry Max. I'd sooner marry—Satan. Oh, yes. When that happens I'll get out quick. I know. I'm wise. You don't need to be scared for me. But meanwhile I go right on—Hello! Say—look!"

The girl was pointing down the ballroom. Her

eyes had widened. They were sparkling with a queer light.

McLagan was leaning forward. He was following the direction of the pointing finger, peering out half hidden behind the curtain hangings. And as he gazed upon the queer scene that had startled his companion the braying of the band crashed awkwardly into complete silence, and the dancing floor was cleared as if by magic.

Three white-robed figures were making their way in silent procession down the length of the room. They moved slowly, and with monkish dignity, their high-pointed mask hoods with their goggling eyeholes, creating an atmosphere that hushed the onlookers to dead silence. Behind them the arched entrance was crowded with similar ghostly figures. But the illusion in this direction was largely counteracted by the array of heavy guns held ready for prompt action by hands all sufficiently human.

It was a tense moment. The silence was deathly. Only the sound of the footsteps of the moving figures broke it. The whole company was shocked to impotence. And the eyes of all were preoccupied between the array in the far archway and the progress of the moving trio. The "hold-up" was complete.

The three figures halted before the buttress pillar which centred one of the walls, and on which was fixed the notice-board whereon was pinned the dance programme for the night. They gathered about it, and for some moments their movements clearly told of their purpose. Then they moved away, returning as they had come, without haste and without a word. Again they passed over the polished floor. They reached the archway and their supporters. They passed through the closed ranks. Then, in a moment, the whole of the silent white army had withdrawn as abruptly as it had appeared.

A rush, a scramble followed. Men and women, even the orchestra men, hurried over to the notice-board. The dance programme was lying on the floor below it and its place had been usurped by a large sheet of paper covering the whole extent of the board.

McLagan and Claire had abandoned their box and joined the curious crowd. They were standing on the fringe of it, gazing at the white sheet of paper bearing its notice written in crude, hand-printed lettering. There was no need to get nearer. The text was plain enough and large enough to be read from across the room.

“TAKE NOTICE

“The people of Beacon Glory are warned that the presence of one, Cy Liskard, on the premises of the Speedway will be the signal for its complete destruction by fire.

“Sgd. CHIEF LIGHT OF THE AURORA.”

Claire turned to the man at her side.

“Max isn’t around,” she said significantly.

McLagan shook his head.

“He’ll be along,” he said, and glanced expectantly in the direction of the arched doorway.

The crowd was recovering itself. It was moving away, and comment and laughter made itself heard in every direction. The bandsmen were hurrying back to their dais where the conductor was summoning them with sharp taps of his baton on his music-stand. The boxes, too, were rapidly refilling. Doctor Finch approached McLagan and Claire. He laughed with a little uncertainty.

“Things are kind of busy,” he said. “Max’ll need to have a sharp eye. These boys don’t bluff any.”

McLagan shook his head.

"No," he admitted seriously. "They don't bluff. If that boy shows up inside the Speedway I wouldn't give five cents for Max's fire policy."

Claire looked round quickly. The band had just started a One-Step. She had been interestedly watching the entrance.

"Let's dance, Ivor," she said quietly. "Max has just come in."

McLagan glanced round quickly. Max, dark, sleek, picturesque, was coming towards them hurrying down the room. His face was unsmiling. And to those who knew him the signs were sufficiently ominous.

McLagan quickly took possession of the girl and drew her away from the region of the notice-board and Max. And as the latter came up and stood himself before the insolent threat it contained, he found himself alone with such emotions as the message inspired. Claire and McLagan, like the rest of the dancers, were observing him half amusedly, half doubtfully, as they glided about over the polished floor which was so much his pride. They knew that his wealth and power as the reigning monarch of his beloved Speedway had been challenged. And they wondered as to its possible effect upon a man of his temperament

CHAPTER X

THE HAUNT OF THE CLANSMEN

FOR all the glory of the night had waned, lost in the deeper shadows of the hour before dawn, the house stood out stark and decaying on the low foreshore of the lake. Once upon a time the place had represented luxury. It had possessed an enclosure where its owner had sought to cultivate a flower garden about it. There had also been a pile-built landing at the water's edge, and a stout boat-house. There had even been a roadway approach from the city which was more than a mile distance. But, like the house itself, these things had long since yielded to the fierce battle of the elements. A few upstanding timber-baulks reared their rotting heads above the water. The original fencing of the enclosure lay rotting on the ground. And the roadway to the city was almost completely submerged by the encroaching waters. For the most part the house was well-nigh roofless. The shingles had been torn from their places, and the underlying joists stood out bare to the storms which swept the plain in the howling winter season.

It was a relic of the vaunting days of the boom of Beacon Glory when easy money so often robbed even the astuter souls of that longer vision of which they

stood in so much need. It had doubtless been the pride of some more than usually fortunate creature's heart, who yearned to possess a lake-side summer residence. There were many signs about it to give such an impression. There were the remains of the deep-roofed stoep for lounging in the sweltering heat of summer. There were the French casement window-frames overlooking the lake. Then the woodwork and the joinery were of the finest quality, while the whole planning suggested a type so beloved of the heart of New England.

But now, with the waters of the lake lapping about the foundations of the verandah, with the garden and the roadway approach a partly submerged wilderness, in the chill windlessness of the last of the night the place only added to the general impression of distance, and darkness, and utter desolation.

The moon had lost its cold brilliance. It lay fallen from its high estate in the dome of the heavens, lolling wearily, a dull yellow disc just above the horizon. The stars, too, had yielded their twinkling brightness. While the cold fires of the Aurora were burning low, and their ceaseless movement suggested a hasty, disorderly retreat to the mysterious fastnesses of the northern world which had given them birth.

Yet life was stirring. And it centred about this derelict habitation.

Two men had passed the rotting fencing, and made their way through the tangle of growth to the back entrance, which clearly opened into the kitchen premises. They paused before the closed door, and remained talking in low tones for some moments. Then one of them, a man of big physique, raised a clenched hand, and his knuckles rapped sharply and peculiarly on the resounding woodwork. There was a further moment of delay. Then the door swung open

inwards, and the darkness beyond swallowed up the newly-arrived visitors.

After awhile there came a further arrival. He was a stoutish creature who gazed searchingly about him in the darkness before passing on beyond the line of the containing fence. But finally he, too, passed from view, as had the earlier comers, and the engulfing solitude in which the derelict habitation was wrapped returned to its unbroken sway.

After that, in quick succession, there were two further arrivals. They came, both of them, from the direction of the sleeping city. They came singly, and in each case their approach was in similar method to those who came before. It was as if rule governed them. They approached cautiously, peering and listening in the dim twilight of the night. Then came the signal knock upon the door. And after that the gaping darkness of the interior swallowed them up in the voiceless mechanical fashion which suggested a contrivance controlled from somewhere in the far interior of the deserted habitation.

As the last of the five visitors passed into the house there came the sound of the bolting and barring of the entrance door. And the final operation was completed just as the first streak of dawn transformed the eastern horizon, and brought forth the waking chorus of the wild fowl upon the lake.

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The room was bare of all ordinary furnishings. The brick walls were cracked, and decayed, and discoloured with damp patches. It was a windowless apartment containing the rusted boiler and gear of a steam-heat furnace. In one corner lay a small quantity of anthracite coal and a rusted shovel, and the concrete floor of the place was a-litter with rubbish, and damp patches, and odds and ends of old

packing-cases clearly left there for the original purpose of kindling.

The place was lit by an oil lamp suspended on a hook in one of the timber joists supporting the floor of the house above. And by its dim, yellow light four white-robed figures, with their sugar-loaf hoods, pierced with eye-holes, were revealed lounging on such of the upturned packing-cases as afforded reasonable security. A fifth was standing, leaning in his immaculate garment against the rusted sides of the derelict furnace.

It was a spectacle for humour to witness these queer, ghostly figures in their secret haunt, holding solemn conclave in a cellar which in ordinary life probably nothing on earth would have induced any of them to enter. But their purpose was utterly and completely serious. They formed the Supreme Executive of the "Council of the Northern Lights," which was the whole control of the great body of the men of the Aurora Clan.

The big man at the furnace was clearly the leader and prime moving spirit of the organisation, and he was talking in the cold, hard fashion which so much suggested his position. His whole manner was that of keen command. But for all the coldness of his tone there was neither roughness of language, nor the least vaunting display of authority.

"We needed this council right away," he said. "We need to take a clear decision before the sun gets up. That's why I sent you boys word when maybe you were yearning to make good the sleep you're needing. We've had a busy night. And I reckon, as a result of it, we've a busy time in the future."

He paused. His hooded head was raised so that its eye-holes were directed at the lantern above him which had begun to splutter. As the flame settled again to its business he went on.

"Our job is primarily to clean up some of the muck lying about our city. I know that. But I never had any doubts, from the moment of our foundation, that an endeavour like ours might easily lead us into other work, other responsibilities. The logic of the whole position is simple. If we reckon to clean up the muck of the city, we also need to set its furniture into decent order. It's no use setting hogs to live in a palace. If we're cleaning up morals let's look to folks' rights."

He paused again. This time he was listening acutely. There was a sound drifting somewhere out over the bosom of the lake. It was the rising of the wind as the sun approached the horizon.

"Now, boys," he went on, speaking more hastily, "I don't want to keep you from the sleep you're all needing. But this is the proposition as a result of this night's work. Beacon stands right at the crossways to-day. Maybe soon there'll be a flood of oil come to its rescue through those folks on the Alsek River. That I guess is in the lap of the gods and the feller running it. Then there's the other thing—gold. It was gold that raised this city. Well, Beacon can go up, or further down, as a result of those two things. A big gold strike, or a big oil strike, can send her sky high. That's all right. But it seems to me our work demands that whether it's the feller, McLagan, with his oil, or any other boy, with gold, we need to see that Beacon gets its due success as a result of any strike in its neighbourhood. I guess McLagan'll play white. If he don't the remedy is with our Clan. But the gold boys are more difficult."

He stood up from the rusty stove, and his white robe was sadly besmirched. But he gave no heed, and went on sharply and with obvious feeling.

"It's that feller, Cy Liskard, we've been dealing with to-night. I believe he's made a strike that

looks like transforming Beacon from a derelict city to a hive of prosperity."

There was a movement amongst his audience which clearly displayed the impression, the effect of the magic of gold upon these men of the gold city. A voice came back at him out of one of the hoods.

"He comes from the Lias River."

"I've heard that, too."

"An' the Lias River runs right back into the mountains, hundreds of miles," said the same voice.

"Sure." The man at the stove nodded his cowed head. "That's so. It runs right back into Canadian territory. If that feller has made a big strike, and I know he has, Beacon should know it. No feller's entitled to more than his claim. Beacon should know the place. Beacon should have a right to jump in, too. Ther's decent men and women with as much right as Cy Liskard, and maybe more, to handle the wealth of this territory, and it's up to us to hand them the chance. We ask 'em to live clean and wholesome. Well, we've the right to show 'em how, and help 'em. We must send a bunch to the Lias River and locate this strike. We must respect Liskard's claim, whether it's in Alaskan or Canadian territory. But we want its secret for the folks of Beacon. Well?"

Discussion followed promptly. It came in the quick, hot fashion of men whose main outlook on life is bounded by the precious metal that first brought their city into being. And the discussion tended to complete agreement with the man whose guidance they had accepted.

The leader listened closely to every argument his council put forth. He agreed to or negatived each argument with calm impartiality. And when, at last, nothing further was forthcoming from his Counsellors, he leant again against his supporting

stove, and raised up one warning hand in sign that the debate was finished.

"I put the proposition," he said formally. "We appoint a bunch of the boys to investigate on the lines we've laid down. There must be no other action taken. The man must be shadowed to his destination. His movements must be watched. And when the discovery is complete, or sufficient has been ascertained of the whereabouts of his strike, full report must be made to this council. Then we will decide on procedure. There are gold men amongst us, but our oath must prevail. The result of this investigation is for the community of Beacon Glory regardless of all individual personal interests. Is it agreed?"

The prompt show of hands was unanimous. Finally the "Chief Light of the Aurora" himself raised his right hand.

One by one the hands were lowered and the leader spoke again.

"It's sufficient. The investigators will set out forthwith. We shall need a competent leader for the work. Therefore I call on you, 'No. 3,'" he said, pointing at the stoutish figure sitting third amongst his audience. "You are best qualified in every way. You have years of the gold trail behind you. And you will know how best to deal with any opposition you may encounter from this man. The meeting is closed."

He reached up and unhooked the lantern in the roof. The next moment the cellar was in complete darkness.

CHAPTER XI

THE WRECK AT THE RIVER MOUTH.

SASA MANNIK was down at the seashore. He was labouring over his fishing tackle, which was only little less primitive than that of his Eskimo forebears. His sturdy, bluff-nosed, sea-going boat was lying nearby on the shelving beach, awaiting the moment when she would be run down into the racing waters waiting to receive her. The man was a half-breed Eskimo, in whom White and Indian ran a neck-and-neck race with the original stock from which he sprang.

Sasa was a characteristic creature. In build he was squat, and of enormous physical strength. He had a beardless face that might have belonged to almost any native race. His eyes were mere deeply-set slits; his mouth was large and loose; his nose was as flat and broad as his cheekbones were high and prominent; while his lank black hair suggested nothing so much as a horse's mane. He was certainly unprepossessing and even crafty to look at, but he was by no means without many redeeming qualities. He was a fisherman first and before everything. But he was a reasonably faithful servant, too. His greatest weakness, however, was

an addiction to a picturesque and superstitious lying which Ivor McLagan, who employed him, chose to condone for the sake of his otherwise useful service. The engineer liked the man. Sasa made a curious appeal to him. And so he paid him ten dollars a month, and permitted him to cook and wash, and look after the log shanty, which, like an eyrie, he had set up on the high cliffs overlooking the mouth of the Alsek River.

It was a no less bleak and desolate inlet than a hundred others which serrated the southern coast-line of Alaska. Attacked from sea and land, a way had been driven through the granite cliffs so that river and sea merged in an ironbound bay, sea-bird haunted and without a vestige of softening from its barren austerity. Its waters were set with numberless upstanding granite fangs, and the swirl of its turbulent tide revealed submerged traps in almost any direction. The bay possessed two definite, comparatively free and wide channels. One travelled southwards while the other hugged tightly to the northern shore. But even in these the racing tide looked ready to crash the adventurous navigator upon unguessed disasters.

Sasa Mannik stood up from his labours and his narrowed eyes gazed contemplatively out over the racing waters. He, like his employer, saw none of the natural terrors with which their high-perched home was surrounded. Ivor McLagan had no business with the hauntings and dread which Nature strives to inspire in her harsher moments. His was the hard, practical, hungry mind of one of the earth's seekers. His only care was for the lure of the business which was his. His home had been pitched in the heart of this natural wilderness, that, in his brief moments of rest from the labours of his enterprise farther up the river, he might look out on the wide-open sea. Whatever the storms that howled about

his staunch homestead there was always hope, and health, and sunlight in the breath of the restless ocean.

Sasa was quite without any concern in the matter of where his existence was set, provided the sea was within his reach. If his boss chose to live like some foolish sea-fowl, perched on the summit of barren cliffs, that was his affair. For himself he would undoubtedly have chosen some sheltered bluff on the river where the worst storm would be powerless to fan the flame of his camp-fire. But then he was not a whiteman and foolish. So he contented himself with things as they were, and fished, and traded his catch at his leisure, and carefully pouched the money he so earned. And meanwhile he ate and drank well at his boss's expense, and fulfilled as much of his side of the contract between them as suited him.

The man's eyes looked to be almost tight shut as he searched the swirl of waters sweeping by, and the cloud-flecked sky above them. All his experience was in full play at the back of his mind. It was a fresh spring day, and the waters were smiling as much as they ever permitted themselves to smile, and the restless gulls were winging in every direction accompanying their efforts with mournful cries of joy. A light breeze was coming out of the north-west.

In Sasa's mind the indications were not all that he might have desired. The north-west wind was always something that could leap suddenly into a howling gale. But then, on the other hand, it was good for the salmon shoals, which at no time of the year he had any scruple about attacking. Yes. On the whole the day was too good to miss. Besides, the risk of a sudden gale added spice to his labours. His boat was stout. It was ready. So was his gear. Then, too, there were many shelters on that broken coast he knew of in case of need.

He turned his dark face to windward, where a sharp

and lofty headland shut out something of his view. His movement possessed no real inspiration. It was the mechanical result of his thought. This way lay the northern channel which surged round the rugged beach at the foot of the headland. He had no thought of passing out that way. It would be simple madness to make the attempt. Besides, it would be impossible. No boat could face the torrential rush of the current in that direction. He knew it as the "Channel of Death."

Not even a crazy whiteman with his boat of iron and smoke could face that channel and hope to reach the sea. But the current had its uses for a real sailor-man like himself. Oh, yes. A hundred times he had sailed home to this beach upon it. And even to do that was an adventure that stirred his native vanity and yielded him vaunting satisfaction in his own skill. No. He would run down on the southern channel. He would fish with the ebb till it was nearing flat water, then he would beat up northward and sail home down the northerly raceway with a free wind. That is if no gale arose to——

His train of thought suddenly broke off short. Something had caught and held his whole attention out there somewhere beyond the sharp-cut headland. And as he gazed, his eyes screwed up in the brilliant sunshine, he drew a sharp breath which was his only expression of astonished incredulity. Just for one brief moment he stood thus. Then he suddenly set off at a run, making all speed for the fierce beach where the ocean rollers roared impotently at the foot of the headland.

More than a month had passed since the night of the Speedway's festival. It had been a time of intensive work for the head of the Mountain Oil Corporation. The summer was short, all too short, for the

work he was engaged upon, and of necessity he was forced to drive hard while the season permitted. Now he was at home drafting an earlier survey of a territory which looked like revolutionising the work of his company.

In the midst of his labours he looked up as the door of his log shanty was unceremoniously thrust open.

The table before which he was seated was a rough enough piece of furniture, as were most of the fitments of this shelter he had set up on the wind-swept cliffs. It was littered with the mechanical drawings, and charts, and maps he was at work upon. There was a queer assemblage, too, of the instruments of his profession lying scattered over the completely untidy apartment.

Peter Loby stood regarding him with a smiling look of relief.

"I'm glad I took the chance, boss," he said, with a laugh of content. "Guess I was two minds about it. You see, I came down the river because I wanted to save you the trip up—an' to gain time."

"Why? What's doing, Peter?"

McLagan spoke quietly, but his eyes were sharply questioning.

Peter was a tall, lean creature whose whole horizon was bounded by oil and the business of extracting it from the bosom of mother earth. He was a practical expert to his finger-tips. But he possessed no knowledge beyond its sheerly technical side. He was glad enough to serve under McLagan. He knew his chief's worth as a dogged, fighting, companionable creature who held his place as the principal representative of the world's greatest oil concern by sheer ability. And he knew his own expertness would have full play under McLagan's control, and such reward on results would come his way as rarely enough fall to the man in his position. Furthermore he liked the man, and

desired nothing better than to serve as his foreman of works.

"Why, I spent three weeks on that coal belt you located last fall. An' I've made a further rough map of the thing you guessed about it but didn't figger to chase up at the time. Here's the map. Maybe you best read it. I'll talk after."

He passed a large linen tracing across to the man behind the table, and drew out a plug of chewing tobacco from the hip-pocket of his moleskin trousers. Then he propped himself against the doorcasing and gazed out seaward, while his lean jaws masticated the chew he had bitten off.

After awhile McLagan looked up from the carefully-drawn chart.

"That belt passes right back into Canadian territory?" he said.

Peter turned.

"Sure, boss," he replied, with a light of triumph in his keen eyes. "But ther's more than that to it. A heap more. That's why I got around on the dead jump."

He stood up from his leaning attitude and his hands were spread out in an expressive gesture. The man was simply bursting with his news.

"It looks to me we're in the heart of the world's biggest coal beds, an' the signs are we're surely right on the fringe of the oilfield that's mixed up with it," he went on. He came over and rested his hands on the table, leaning forward the more surely to impress the man behind it. "I tell you, boss, right here, we've hit the biggest cinch since the world began. We're on oil now, and drilling through hard black lime. That's all right. But further back is where the real stuff lies, an' it's right in the heart of such a coal belt as I've only dreamed about. It's a range of coal mountains. It's nothing less. And the

valleys are the natural drainways for the thick juicy oil we're yearning to tap. It's that brought me along. I want to take you right up there to see the thing it is. But I'm crazy for you to wire this report, I've got here, from Beacon to our folks down home. Here it is, boss," he went on urgently, as he drew a folded sheet from an inside pocket. "I wanted you to get that, an' send it from Beacon first, an' then come right along up where I can show you oil lying around where ther' ought to be only creeks of mountain water."

The man was wellnigh beside himself with excitement. Oil was his job. Oil was his whole life. And out of his experience and keen practical knowledge he knew he had jumped into the heart of such an Eldorado as he had only found hitherto in his dreams.

But McLagan refused to be caught up by the infection of the man's excitement. It was not that he doubted. He never doubted when Peter Loby gave his considered opinion on such a subject. But he knew the amazing nature of the man's assertion, and he knew that never before had he experienced a moment when calm judgment was more surely needed.

He read the written report. Then he looked up at the man who still stood leaning over the table awaiting his decision. He nodded.

"If this is right, Peter, it's—the biggest thing in the world," he said.

His eyes were shining.

"It's right, boss. You'll pass that on?"

McLagan shook his head.

"It's too—big—as it is," he said. "Too sweeping. I'll rewrite it, and let you see what I'll send. I just daren't send it all till we've tried it out. I'm glad you came along down, Peter."

He held out a hand and the oil man gripped it.

"Act the way you think, boss," the man said, but with a shadow of disappointment. "You know best. Say—it's great."

"It surely is. After this I guess you'll be able to quit the game and sit back—Hello!"

Sasa Mannik's stocky body was filling up the open doorway. He stood there breathlessly gesticulating.

"Boss! Boss! You come quick!" he cried. "It dam fool whiteman with big ship, plenty much sail. Him come along by raceway tide. Him break all up sure. All no good break up. You come quick. Crazy whiteman. All dam fool. No good."

The three men were standing outside the hut perched so perilously near to the sharp-cut edge of the sheer cliff. They were standing at an altitude of something over four hundred feet, gazing over the wild scene of the bay. It was the highest point immediately overlooking the mouth of the Alsek River.

Behind them, to the north and to the south, rose the great hills which had remained snow-clad throughout the ages. But there the iron cliffs of the coast-line stretched out at something like a uniform level. Far as the eye could see the smiling ocean lay spread out, glittering under the keen Spring sunshine, while below them, marked clearly, sharply, lay the ugly ruins of torn rock which the storms of centuries had hewn from the parent cliffs.

It was a scene these men knew by heart. All three were gazing out seawards. Their eyes were fixed upon a vessel that looked to be driving head on, under full sail, for the merciless rocks guarding the entrance to the river mouth.

It was a sight that stirred the whitemen deeply. It was a sight that filled them with a strangely oppressive feeling of complete helplessness, and left them no

longer concerned with those things which a moment before had completely preoccupied them. Here, on a calm Spring day, with a seemingly flat sea, a whiteman's vessel under full sail—no wreck, no derelict with broken masts and spars, and with perhaps the steering-gear carried away—was heading calmly, almost it seemed happily, to become a total wreck on perhaps the cruellest coast in the world. It was amazing. It was staggering. The awesomeness of the spectacle left them without a word.

Not so, however, the half-breed who had brought the news. Perhaps he was less stirred by such a vision of coming disaster. Perhaps, in his curious, savage mind, the life or death of a few crazy white-folk was of no serious account. At any rate he was under no spell of silent awe.

"It all same lak I see this whiteman do all time," he commented for his companion's benefit. "What you mak? I tell you this. Whiteman sailor see big bay. He see it all through much long glass. He say; 'Yes. It good. We mak him land.' He not think nothing. He not think ever. He whiteman. He do as he please. Yes. It same all time. Whiteman boss look for oil. He say; 'We find him.' So he look where only hill, an' forest, an' river. He look for oil. Psha! I see whiteman down the coast same like this, too. He come down in big canoe. He look, look all time for some thing. I not know. He search much. He climb rock. He peek in cave. All time he look where nothing is. That whiteman, sure. All time look where nothing is. I know. This man sailor. He mak break up all bimeby. He look for some thing. So he come. He sure find some thing bimeby. Plenty rock. Plenty all break up. Plenty all go dead."

"Oh, beat it!"

It was Peter who flung his impatience at the half-

breed. His chatter at such a moment was insufferable. Out there far beyond the headland the vessel was steadily heading on its course. It was racing down out of the north-west, straight, almost as an arrow's flight, for the desperate entrance to the bay.

McLagan remained silent. He seemed oblivious to everything but the amazing vision of the doomed ship. His narrowed eyes searched her closely. She was smallish as sea-going vessels went. He gathered from her sails and masts she was some sort of full-rigged ship. Perhaps a coaster. Her sails were full in the fair wind. She was yawing slightly, but not sufficiently to set her aback. But it was sufficient to suggest some lack of control. Suddenly an inspiration took hold of him. He turned to the now silent half-breed.

"You Sasa," he said sharply. "It was blowing yesterday an' you didn't go out poaching the salmon. That poor devil of a ship's caught in your Death Current. She's made a lee-shore and got caught in the current. She'll pull up right on the beach of our river. Do you understand? He's no fool skipper looking to make a landing. He can't darn well help himself. Don't you see? Here Peter," he turned to the oil man on the other side of him, and his tone was urgent, and thrilling with the horror of the thing he realised was about to happen. "You don't know this coast like we do. There's a maelstrom current out there. The only crazy man in the world who'd go near it is this feller, Sasa. Ther' isn't a steamer in the world could beat its way out of it if it once got caught up in it. As for a windjammer like that—Psha!" he threw up his hands expressively. "That's it. He's made a lee-shore in the gale. And now—God help him!"

He turned again to Sasa.

"Where'll he beach?" he asked sharply.

The half-breed pointed down at the wide foreshore on the south side of the river mouth.

"He mak that beach," the man replied promptly. Then he pointed down at the northern beach where his own boat was still lying. "I mak him dis way. But I know. I sail him all time by the headland. So I slip him current, an' mak quick shelter by the headland. Big ship not slip him current. Oh, no. He mak so." He swung an outstretched arm from right to left, indicating a great sweep across the bay. "He full current. An——"

"Sasa."

"Yep, boss."

"Can we signal from that headland?"

The half-breed's eyes widened.

"Wo' for we signal. It no good sure. Him crazy whiteman not understand nothing. Him ship in the Death Current. He go on. Oh, yes. Crazy whiteman break all up bimeby." He shrugged. "It all same all time. Same like that other who look into caves an' climb rocks. I see him one time mak right out to sea in canoe only built for river. Him current tak him. I get him with my boat. I tak him back. He not say nothing but curse me for a black son-of-a-bitch. Sure he all break up bimeby."

The doomed vessel was crashing on at terrific speed. Already it was looming large as it approached the headland. And now, as it drew nearer, its yawing became more and more pronounced. For some moments no one spoke while they contemplated the wretched vessel's impending fate. Then, as her high bows disappeared behind the upstanding belt of the headland, McLagan turned on his contemptuous servant.

"Who's the feller you're talking about? The feller who looks into caves and climbs rocks?" he asked sharply.

The half-breed shrugged without withdrawing his gaze from where the vessel was disappearing behind the headland.

"How I say? I not know. He come down the river out of the hills. What you call him? All whitemans say him Li-as, yes? Indian man say him Devil River. Oh, yes, he come this way. I see him one, two, three time this man while I fish. He not see me, only one time. Maybe he fish. I not know. Plenty fish by Devil River. Oh, yes. Say. Look. Him come as I say. See? The Death Current take him. So. See?"

He pointed. His narrow eyes were alight with something almost like joy as the bows of the vessel cleared the headland and the doomed ship raced on for the far beach.

"It much big tide. Oh, yes. He go right up to the big rocks. Bimeby the tide fall. Then us go find plenty thing. Food, clothes, blanket. All thing dead whiteman not need more. So. I——"

"Quit it, you darn thief!" McLagan's eyes were furious as he turned on his ghoulish henchman. "And you'll stay right here and not move a step till Mr. Loby and I get back. You're nothing but a dirty scum of a half-breed. And if I get you near that wreck without my permission I'll take you right in to Beacon and get you hanged."

He turned to Peter.

"It's no good, boy. I can't stand it. We've got to do something. Poor devils, they're surely doomed. Come on. Maybe we can help some. We'll get right on down. We'll get Sasa's boat and ferry across to where she'll hit that beach. I——"

"I go, too, boss."

Sasa was no longer contemplating the wreck he had hoped to enjoy. His attitude had suddenly become one of pleading.

"You not mak that crossing without me," he urged. "I know. Him my boat, an' I sail him good plenty. You my good boss. You drown sure you sail him, my boat. I come. Yes? I not tak whiteman's blankets. His food. His——"

McLagan raised a threatening hand.

"For God's sake shut up and come on," he cried impatiently. "Come on, Peter. Maybe ther's women down there. We'll do what we can."

The engineer waited for no reply. The vessel was looming largely half-way across the bay. Now, as she passed into the shelter of the towering cliffs, her sails were flapping and booming in the breeze. But she was racing on to her destruction on the tremendous current, helpless yet almost magnificent in her white suiting over her black hull. It seemed incredible that nothing could be done to save her. A fresh, calm Spring day with a flat sea. And yet there was no help for her.

Not a sound came up from her decks but the crashing of her great sails. There was not a single human voice crying out its agony of despair. Only there came the mournful shrieks of the circling sea-fowl as the men raced down the rocky pathway to the beach below.

CHAPTER XII

THE "LIMPET" OF BOSTON

THE outlook of the day had materially changed with the tide. The wind had increased mightily, and the fine, fresh, early summer sky had changed to one of banking storm-clouds which drove down out of the north-west. It was a prospect of rough weather, for all there were still moments when the sun broke through the grey, and strove nobly to lighten the depressing outlook.

McLagan and his companions were standing on the slippery, weed-grown rocks. They were gazing speculatively up at the high sides of the wrecked vessel as she lay cradled upon the jagged belt of rocks which the ebb of the tide had laid bare. She was lifted high out of the water, for the flood-tide had long since abandoned her. It had done the work it had striven to accomplish. It had flung its victim crashing upon the trap concealed within its merciless bosom. And now, in turn, satisfied, perhaps satiated, it had itself yielded to the greater forces of Nature. As the waters receded the vessel was left with her high, bluff nose stubbed deeply into the sharply shelving beach, which alone had saved her from com-

plete destruction upon the granite walls of the cliffs beyond.

It was a sight for real pity. Even to the unskilled minds of these landsmen she was a fine, sturdy craft that deserved better of the elements. There she lay slightly a-list, wounded, and sorely stricken. Her forepeak was literally disembowelled, and they could only guess at the damage the rest of her bottom had suffered. Her yards were groaning under a hectoring wind, and her torn sails were slashing and whipping viciously in response to its onslaught. Her plates seemed to be sprung in every direction, and she lay there utterly helpless, awaiting the inevitable and complete destruction that was yet to come.

McLagan had first approached the wreck on the height of the tide. His purpose had been the simple succour of those poor souls he had expected to find on board. The adventure had been full of risk, even under the consummate skill of the half-breed who had done his best. But the terrible tide, and the increasing wind had defeated them, and, reluctantly enough, they had been driven to a perilous stand-off while they hailed the doomed vessel.

They had shouted. They shouted again and again, seeking to make their voices heard above the roar of the ocean rollers driving down upon the vessel's sides. But the effort had been unavailing. There was not a sign or sound of life about her. And their only response was the roar of the sea, and the mocking cries of the sea-fowl whirling about her protesting rigging.

So in the end they had been forced to yield. There was no alternative. They dared not approach nearer. Under the prevailing conditions their only hope of approaching the wreck was to await the fall of the tide and make the shore upon which it was piled.

But even so their attempt had not been wholly

fruitless. They had discovered many things of deep interest. They had discovered the vessel's name, which was set out plainly on her bluff stern. She was the *Limpet*. And her port of registration was the city of Boston. Furthermore they realised that though her rudder-post remained in place the rudder itself was gone. Then they understood that she had the shape and qualities of a coasting vessel of more than usual deep-seagoing type. She was built for heavy weather as well as the lighter work of her coasting trade. And they beheld, too, a wireless ariel was still in its place between her main and mizzen masts.

But in McLagan's mind the greatest significance lay in the fact that she was still laden with a deck cargo of lumber, and all her top gear was intact, and all her sails were set, and the only signs of her distress were the inroads which the wind had made upon her canvas suiting. From the distance, when she had first been discovered, she had looked to be riding proudly, gallantly to her death under full sail. But at close quarters it was clearly evident that this had been something of an illusion. Her sails were full set, it was true, but there were many sad rents that were widening every moment, and, in many places, their clews were straining upon a last, desperate hold.

Now, with the tide at its lowest ebb, standing beside her on the rocks these men were less concerned for her superstructure than for the evidence the rocks had imposed upon her. Peter Loby was staring in simple wonder at the yawning gash torn out of her bows. Sasa Mannik, in true "wrecker" fashion, was contemplating her from the point of view of his own advantage. He was a sailorman, and here were gear, ropes, and canvas, and possibly all the needs of his heart, for the simple process of collecting it. He had no concern for anything else. But Ivor McLagan

gazed upon her wrecked bows while his mind was preoccupied by the mystery of her presence in the remote inlet where he had set up his home.

He was convinced now that she was without life on board. But the condition of her fully-set sails also convinced him that her abandonment had taken place in fair weather, perhaps, even, in a dead calm. He was left quite unimpressed by her rudderless condition. He argued that this disaster must have occurred after her abandonment. For even to him it seemed impossible that **any** responsible shipmaster could have set full sail on a vessel without steering gear. Then, except for the almost paintless condition of her rusted hull, there was no other sign of distress about her. Her deck cargo was aboard, and her boats, as far as he had been able to judge, were snugged as though there had never been a thought of the necessity for launching them.

No. It was a curious, even mysterious visitation. He understood, he had often enough heard of a lee-shore and its dangers to a sailing vessel. Clearly something of the sort must have happened. But not in association with this vessel's abandonment.

He turned abruptly to his subordinate and pointed at the mass of rusted cable strewn about the rocks fallen through the rent in the vessel's side like the litter of some wounded monster's bowels.

"That looks to me the easy way aboard," he said sharply. "I don't figger to know a deal when it comes to sea-craft. But it likely seems the hole that belched up that junk ought to be a way up to her decks."

Peter nodded. He glanced up over the sprung plates of her sides.

"It surely looks that way," he agreed. "Maybe—Holy gee! Here! Get a look up there! Look at 'em!" he cried excitedly pointing up at the vessel's

rail. "Ther's scores! Ther's regiments of 'em! Get a look at those darn rats!"

All three men were staring up at a sight rarely enough to be seen. Peter's excited estimate was by no means exaggerated. Just above the vessel's rail was an upstanding pile of lumber, and it was literally swarming with rats of all sizes, from the full-grown, long-whiskered, grey patriarchs down to the extreme youth of the colony. They were running hither and thither without apparent aim or object till it seemed they must be participating in some sort of curious rodent gambol, or driven by senseless panic.

It was sufficiently repulsive to gaze upon. There was something utterly repellent in it. For some reason it is against human nature to view these pests without deeply-stirred feelings. And for all the hardiness of these men the effect upon them now was wholly one of loathing.

The scene only occupied a minute or so. Then, of a sudden, one rat, bigger, it seemed, than all the rest, suddenly made its appearance. He came to the rail of the vessel. He seemed to be contemplating it closely, or perhaps he was contemplating the men standing below him on the rocks. Then, at last, apparently satisfied with his survey, he set off along the rail on the run. In a moment the rest were following behind. They ran close together in single file, head to tail, till they looked like a long, thick, moving grey rope. At a given point the leader turned off back on to the deck, and the swarming creatures pursued him.

With the passing from view of the hindmost McLagan spat and shrugged his shoulders.

"Quitting," he said. Then he laughed. "It's the way of things. She's doomed. So—the rats are quitting. Guess it makes me sick in the stomach. I'll hail you boys if I get through this way."

He moved over to the great hole in the vessel's side, and, stooping, peered within the dark cavity. He stood there for a moment. Then Peter saw him move forward, and the hole swallowed him up.

For all the extent of the rent in the vessel's side the forepeak was dark, and low, and dank with the stench of bilge and rust. McLagan was forced to move cautiously over the piles of rusted cable, for he was utterly unfamiliar with his surroundings. But soon his keen eyes grew accustomed to the twilight and he was able to measure with some accuracy the place in which he found himself. A steel bulkhead shut him off from the rest of the vessel's hold, and the walls of the place sloped inwards till their point of meeting was lost beneath the tangle of chains at his feet. Right in the centre he discovered a fixed iron companion ladder standing sheerly erect. And examination showed him that it mounted up through manholes to the top deck, where a small, gaping hatchway revealed full daylight.

In a moment he was swarming towards the light above.

The three men were standing in the narrow limits of the ship's cabin. It was small and unpretentious enough, but not without some refinement of decoration. The deck of the ship's poop roofed the room, and, as is usual in such cases, the ceiling it made to the cabin was picked out in panels which were outlined in somewhat striking but sufficiently harmonious colours. It was the same with the walls, and the doors which opened out of the apartment. The fixed chairs against the centre table were of the usual ship's mahogany, and the upholstery was well-worn leather. There was no other furnishing to the place except strips of somewhat decayed carpeting pinned securely to the deck.

But there was that set out on the table which held both the whitemen deeply preoccupied with its significance. It was a meal obviously arranged for only *one* man. And it was only half consumed. There was no confusion, no litter, no sign of hasty abandonment, except that the meal appeared to have been broken off in the middle of it.

The table was partly covered with a white cloth that had seen better and cleaner days. There was a dish containing some sort of hash that had become dried up. In front of what was obviously the captain's seat at the head of the table, and which faced the alleyway entrance to the apartment, was a plate containing the remains of a portion of the hash. This, too, was dried up and shrivelled. And beside it lay a knife and fork which were both smeared as with use in consuming the food. Beside these, again, was the gnawed remains of some broken bread, and a drink that was clearly whisky and water.

Further along the table stood a dingy cruet. And beyond this again was an uncut fruit pie. The crust of this was almost gone, and that which remained was sour-looking and mildewed. This too had been obviously consumed by rats. And it was the same with the contents of a bread basket which stood beside it. Even the table-cloth itself had failed to escape the insatiable depredations of the rodents. But the signs were unmistakable. The meal had been interrupted. The man who had been devouring it had been suddenly inspired to abandon it. And for some unguessed reason he had clearly failed to return.

McLagan raised a hand and pushed his cap back from his forehead. It was a gesture of perplexity.

"It looks tough," he said slowly. "It looks like that feller didn't take time to eat right for the darn hurry he was in. He was a plain liver, too, I'd say. But he surely was in an almighty hurry."

Peter Loby nodded. Imagination in him was working hard, but the result was negative. He glanced up from the table and his eyes surveyed the walls with the doors which opened out into what were clearly the officer's sleeping quarters. There were only three doors besides the entrance from the alleyway.

"It's the kind of thing to leave you guessing," he admitted. "We've looked right into it all from the fo'castle head to this cabin. But ther's still those state-rooms yet. Maybe one of 'em 'll hand us the ship's papers and the log. That ought to tell us the story of it. It's most certainly queer."

"Queer?" McLagan laughed shortly. He shook his head. "That don't say a thing. Think back, man. What have we found so far. From the carpenter's shop under the fo'castle head to the men's quarters, and the galley, and this, we've found just the thing you'd expect to find in a full crewed, well found ship—except the ship's company itself." He shrugged. "There were chips and wood lying around in the tool shop—and tools—just as if the boy who worked there had only just quit his job. The men's quarters in the fo'castle looked to be in the sort of order you'd find in a ship about to set out for sea, an' before she's taken on her crew. As for the galley, you could start right in to fix food there now, and not be worried a thing, except for being short on pots an' things. Look at the lumber stacked on the deck. It's there ready for a sea trip without a stick or lashing out of place, and I'd say the hold cargo's likely the same. And as for the boats——" He paused and gazed thoughtfully about him and his eyes came to rest again on the rat-gnawed food on the table which held him fascinated. "That's the queerest thing of it all. This craft was built with four boats, and they're all in place snugged down, and I'd say they've

never been unshipped except for a coat of paint. Here's a darn craft been sailing loose for maybe weeks or months without a soul on board we can locate, not even with the rats belonging her—now. And there's not a sign of how or why the folks belonging her quit."

He turned and flung himself into the chair that had obviously been that usually occupied by the captain of the vessel. He seemed to be completely at a loss. Peter moved over to one of the doors, and peered into the apartment beyond. Sasa displayed no curiosity. His dark eyes were unusually wide, and a curious brooding light left them almost expressionless. He stood staring down at the littered table, and, after a few prolonged moments of silence, McLagan stirred irritably in his chair.

"Get around in those three state-rooms, or whatever they are, Peter, an' take the darn Breed with you," he cried. "Poke around and smell out. Sasa'll be more use that way than gawking like some darn mutt around here. If you find a thing, shout me. I'm stopping around to worry this thing out right here."

McLagan was rarely enough given to irritation. But oppressive irritation was driving him now. He remained where he was until his lieutenant and the half-breed had passed into the first of the three compartments. Then, as the door swung to behind them, he started up and passed swiftly from the room. Moving down the alleyway, beyond the steward's pantry, he came to the break of the poop and out into the daylight.

Here he paused. It was good to be out in the air again. And a sense of relief came to him as he surveyed the scene. The main deck here was clear of cargo. It was clean, almost as clean as if it had only just endured the attentions of the sand and

canvas so beloved of the seaman. Rope ends, that should have been neatly cleated, or coiled away, were littered where the weather had flung them. But it was the only sign of any confusion.

He breathed his relief as he leant against the doorway and surveyed it all with contemplative eyes. The wind was screaming through the rigging, and the torn sails were booming out their protests. The sky was darkening with a real threat of storm, and beyond the high prow of the wreck the grey walls of the bay rose up gaunt and forbidding.

The whole thing had gotten hold of McLagan in a curiously depressing fashion. He felt that somehow there was an unusual story lying behind the circumstances of this fair-weather wreck. And his practical mind was searching every avenue that opened up to its vision.

Mutiny? His mind naturally turned to mutiny, but he dismissed the thought immediately. There was not a sign of mutiny from the ship's bows to her stern-post. There was not a sign of force or struggle, and her boats were in place. Storm? He shook his head. No storm had broken the heart of her crew. What else was there to cause her abandonment? Nothing. No. Look which way he would there was no reasonable solution in the vessel's condition. There had been a purely voluntary exodus, orderly, quiet, even if hasty. Of that he was convinced. There was no other conclusion to come to. No. Whatever there still remained to be discovered in her holds, and in those cabins behind him, there was nothing much else for him to do but to drive into Beacon on the work he had in hand, and carry in with him the report of this wreck to Alan Goodchurch, who represented the United States Government for the district. That would have to be done. But meanwhile——

A curious look leapt suddenly into his narrow eyes. He was looking out straight before him down the deck. Immediately in his focus were the securely battened main hatch, and the galley, and the fo'castle. There were the iron-shod steps of the companion-ladder up to the roof of these, and, to the right of that, stood a tarpaulin covered winch, with behind it the donkey-engine room. His gaze was riveted on the deckway that passed beyond this, and which was stacked high with great baulks of lumber.

But it was not these things which had inspired the curious, questioning, incredulous look with which he gazed upon them. It was something else. Something which startled him, and made him turn quickly to the stormy sky, which, at that moment, had broken to permit a pallid beam of sunshine to make its way through. It was only for a moment he looked up, however. Then again he became absorbed in the deck ahead of him.

Suddenly he stood erect. He had abandoned his lounging. The doubt in his eyes had given place to something else which baffled description. He drew a deep breath, while a chilly sensation passed through his great body, and left him with a feeling of curious helplessness.

He remained unmoving. His fascinated gaze was still held. Not for a moment did it shift. It almost seemed as if it were impossible for him to look away. Then the grey of the storm clouds closed up again, and the sunbeam faded out. And as it did so he raised a hand slowly, almost involuntarily, and passed it hesitatingly across his forehead.

With that movement mobility returned to him. He turned and glanced back into the alleyway. The next moment the sharp tones of his voice rang out.

"Anything doing, boy?" he called harshly. And

he followed up his question by hastily passing back into the cabin.

The search was over. McLagan and Peter Loby were standing at the break of the poop-deck. Sasa Mannik had separated from the others, and was squatting hunched upon the main hatch. He was watching the whitemen, contemplating them with narrowed eyes while his shrewd native mind was following a train of thought which deeply preoccupied him.

"I'm not a thing wiser," Peter said, in reply to a question. "There wasn't a scrap of paper, or a bunch of human clothes. But I wouldn't rely on that too much. You see, I hurried, an' when you're looking that way you're liable to miss things. Ther's one of those rooms for wireless. The other two were bunks. One with one bunk, and the other with two. Both had bed fixings, and they looked so they hadn't been slept in. It gets me beat. The lockers were plumb empty, just as though they'd been cleared out to leave no trace. It's the queerest——"

He broke off. Sasa's harsh voice had broken in on him. He had risen from his place on the hatch, and his eyes had widened out of their usual narrowing.

"I go," he said sharply. "This bad ship—no good. Bimeby I not come back ever."

He turned and glanced almost fearfully about him.

"Why, Sasa? You don't like it? Why?"

McLagan's questions came sharply and on the instant. There was a half smile in his eyes. But there was nothing smiling behind them.

Sasa spat viciously on the deck.

"Bad Spirit plenty," he said with native panic in his widened eyes. "I go."

And without waiting for reply, or, perhaps, because he feared lest he should be detained, he passed quickly

across to the vessel's rail where a heavy downhaul was sprawled on the deck. He flung it over the side. And, in a moment, he had followed it, and was swarming down to the rocks below.

"This thing's got on his nerves," Peter laughed.

McLagan nodded. But there was no responsive laughter.

"And I don't somehow wonder," he said. Then he shrugged. "I guess we can't do any good here now. I'll get along back, and pass right on into Beacon. I'll need to make a report to Goodchurch on this. I surely will."

CHAPTER XIII

THE " COME-BACK "

A RADIANT sky was smiling down upon the forest-clad hills. Somewhere away to the west the sun was lolling just above the horizon. For the moment its glory was lost behind the ranging hills with their garments of every shade of green. There was no cloud to be seen anywhere from the purpling distance of the snow-capped mountains in the east, to the western splendour of the summer sunset.

Cy Liskard was squatting over a camp-fire that was built just outside his log home on the hillside. Nearby his dogs were pursuing some evening pastime that appealed to their savage natures. Maybe it was play. But the snarls that were so frequently accompanied by the fierce snapping of ivory-shod jaws suggested the narrow line dividing it from canine warfare.

His ponies were beyond the fence of a small, roughly-constructed corral, and they stood close up to it at a point most nearly approaching the home of the man it was their life's burden to serve. Their shaggy heads, still rough with the remains of a winter coat which neglect had left clinging to them, were thrust over the log rail. They were clearly waiting

with equine patience the long overdue attention to which they had full right.

The man disregarded their appeal. He was in a mood to disregard any duty that might have been his. Even the claims of his own stomach were forgotten in the consuming depths of impotent rage that were driving him. His expressionless eyes gazed out through the smudge of smoke which lolled heavily upon the still, fresh mountain air. His view was over the range of his gold workings, which lay down below upon the wide bank of the creek. But for all his gaze was for the thing which held him to his mountain solitude, his thought was left all unconcerned for it.

He had returned from Beacon only that noon. The long trail had claimed him for days, as the condition of his fleshless ponies testified. He had driven hard and mercilessly, for there was that behind him which impelled him in a fashion he had never known before. But the thing which had driven him had no relation to fear. Or, if it had, his apprehension was utterly lost in the rage that smouldered behind his pale eyes. He had driven his ponies to their last extremity out of an almost crazy desire for speed and movement that he might reach the security of his home for the sole purpose of nursing his fierce desire for swift vengeance upon Ivor McLagan.

He sat with his rough hands clasped about his knees. He remained unmoving. There was room for nothing in the mind behind his stony stare but the fierce longing to hurt, and the method by which it could be achieved.

He felt himself to be beyond the reach of the men of the Aurora Clan. He felt himself free from every threatening human danger, lost in the heart of these distant hills. As for the threat of that which his return to Beacon might mean, he dismissed it without

a moment's consideration. He intended to return to Beacon just whenever it suited him. It might entail watchfulness. It would undoubtedly entail sufficient weapons of defence. But he never moved without these. And in the open, and in the daylight, fully prepared, he knew himself to be a match for these absurdly tricked out bunglers who sought to impress their will upon a foolish, credulous, awed bunch of white-livered citizens.

No. It was not against the men of the Aurora Clan that his fury was directed. He held them in contempt for all they had forced from him an oath under threat of hanging. He knew well enough the nearness to disaster to which he had been brought. He knew they had meant their threat, and would have hanged him out of hand had he failed to yield his oath. Their other doings were not unknown to him. He had heard of Bernard's and other outrages. But the whole thing had left him unimpressed. When men were driven to spectre-play to achieve their ends he felt that sufficient boldness could defeat them all the time. So these white-shirted creatures with their cedar boughs, and rawhide hanging ropes, were dismissed from his mind leaving him free to contemplate that other who had brought about his undoing at the Speedway.

Ivor McLagan. Oh, he knew the man by reputation. Furthermore he knew the work he was engaged upon, and where that work was being done. And this was the man against whom all his rage and desire for vengeance was directed.

Once he released his clasped hands, and, reaching out one heavily-booted foot, he kicked the embers of his fire together. With the sunset the air of the mountains was chill enough. For all the man's toughness, for all the thick pilot cloth of his pea-jacket, and the thick flannel he wore underneath,

the chill bit harshly and forced him to regard the life of his fire. He flung a number of logs on to it from his nearby stack of fuel, and edged closer to the leaping blaze. Then again his arms embraced his knees, and he yielded himself to the schemes and plans which sprang so readily to his mind.

The wound inside his lips was still raw where McLagan's blow had split open the flesh against his teeth. But he needed no reminder. He never would need reminding. The memory of that night was indelibly fixed upon a mind which was utterly incapable of forgetting an injury. But such evidence as still remained only the more surely drove his headlong desire. He meant to kill Ivor McLagan, and the only problem that presented itself to him was the manner he should prefer for the accomplishment of his purpose.

Oh, yes. He would kill McLagan. He would have killed him at the Speedway, or sometime that night, but for the men who had smothered him in their numbers. Well, he was beyond their interference now. He was out in the open. There was only the open between him and McLagan, a vast, rugged back country, where there was no human agency to interfere between him and his vengeance. Yes, out there they were far hidden from the rest of the world with only the hills to fling back the death-cry he would wring from his——

He broke off from his lusting thought. A broad beam of the dying sun's light drove its way through the loose arms of a woodland bluff. It lit the ground on which he sat, and enveloped his hunched body. He turned with all the alertness he might have displayed in the presence of an enemy, and his expressionless eyes looked into the blaze of light. For a moment the illusion was complete. Low down on the horizon the sun was sinking to its final rest.

And as it passed from view it looked like a world of consuming fire devouring the woods which lay in the path of its amazing light.

It was only for an instant that his narrowed eyes confronted the intolerable burden of its fierce light. Then he sprang to his feet and moved away. And his going was something almost precipitate, headlong. In a moment he had vanished within the doorway of his primitive home.

The moon was at the full of its glory. The night was no less cloudless than had been the close of day. The sky was ablaze with stars, but from the heart of the hills no aurora was visible.

Down on the creek below Cy Liskard's home the world seemed severely limited. On either hand, before and behind, the hills rose sharply in every direction. It was overpowering, overwhelming. The sky above was transformed into a narrow canopy, with the silver of the moon shining directly down upon the bosom of the little creek. The region was brilliantly lit by its ghostly light. Every detail of it was sharply outlined. And it flung the ghostly shadows of the trees in every direction. Then the waters of the creek, still flowing with something of their spring freedom, were transformed into a perfect ribbon of silver.

Midnight was gone, and the small hours were slowly growing. The valley was full of the strange night sounds of a creature world whose day it was. Cries came echoing down through the forest which clothed the hillsides. And the voices of water life kept up an incessant chorus. It was a world of Nature's unutterable peace—and something else.

There was movement about the banks of the creek. There was movement amongst the gear of the gold seeker. So, too, was it on the broad hillside about

the cabin where Cy Liskard had abandoned himself to the blankets which nightly claimed him. It was the silent, ghostly movement of white-robed figures. They stood out in sharp relief under the brilliant light of the moon. They came and passed on. They paused. They crouched, searching. They moved without haste or apparent fear of disturbance. And their long white gowns and high-peaked head-pieces transformed them from living humanity into the spirits of the night.

The thing that was in progress was plain enough to read. The white-clad figures were searching the valley of the gold workings for information of the "strike" which the sleeping man had made. Their movement made it impossible to estimate their numbers with any accuracy, for the forest, reaching down to the water's edge in many places, hid up much of it. Possibly there were a dozen. Possibly less. But, whatever the number, the search was utterly exhaustive. The corral, the log hut on the hillside were not left unexplored. And the presence of the man's dogs only made it something curious that no canine voice had been raised in protest.

There was not a sound to disturb the night, or to give alarm to the sleeping man. The dogs lay huddled on the ground as though in the deepest slumber, and the man slept on profoundly while the figures moved about the interior of his quarters.

It was all curious. But there was doubtless an answer to it. These men had travelled far and hard under the strictest orders to return with a full report of the gold strike made by Cy Liskard. Their report depended on a complete and uninterrupted investigation. There were many means of accomplishing this. It would have been simple enough to deal with the man himself. In their numbers they could have taken him in his blankets. But perhaps they

had no desire that he should be aware of their visitation. In that case there were other measures. Similar measures such as had doubtless silenced the dogs. A whiff of some pungent narcotic and the sleep of these creatures, human as well as canine, would be infallibly prolonged.

The search went on to its conclusion. It was prolonged and completely thorough. And when the movements of the Aurora men ceased, and their ghostly figures no longer haunted the valley, the moon had passed from her throne in the heavens, and the starlight was already beginning to fade out. Then came darkness, utter and complete. It was the darkness preceding dawn. And the valley of the Lias River was given up wholly to the haunting sounds of the night.

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Cy Liskard was ashore at a landing on the river he had made his own. His stout canoe was lying moored to the overhanging trunk of a tree. And it swung away at the end of its rawhide to the easy stream. A roll of blankets lay in the bottom of it, while his camp outfit was littered upon the gravelly foreshore about his feet. It was noon or thereabouts, and the day was overcast and threatening. But down here on the river was the pleasant warmth of a summer day.

He was gazing out down-stream, and his view was of a great expanse of flowing water moving heavily on towards the sea. There were many miles between him and the coast yet. The journey would run into something approaching one hundred and more, which it would take days to travel. But it was not the distance he had yet to go that preoccupied him. It was not the scene set out before him, with its amazing hills and dense forests growing down to the water's

edge. He was literally, and, perhaps, spiritually at the parting of the ways.

Directly ahead of him a hill reared its lofty crest. It stood up an indestructible barrier to the rushing waters hurtling on towards the distant ocean. It had faced the fierce onslaught of the stream throughout the ages. It had yielded nothing but the loose soil about its rocky base. And the waters which refused denial of their progress had turned sharply away in face of its heroic resistance.

Somewhere to the north of that hill he knew that another river flowed over an almost parallel course. It was a smaller river which owed its source to the same world of hills as that which bred the flood of the Lias. But it was not for its proximity he was concerned. It was not for its relation to his own. It was because somewhere further down its course Ivor McLagan's oil camp was pitched. And Ivor McLagan was the man who had hurt and thwarted him.

Somehow the night had at first wrought a change in the almost insane mood in which Cy Liskard had sought his blankets. He had awakened heavily, with a feeling of unusual depression. He had awakened without any yearning for immediate action against the man who had hurt him. He had found himself contemplating his future outlook without enthusiasm or deep interest, and it was not until he had broken his fast, and perfunctorily executed the simple chores he was accustomed to perform, that his evil spirit returned to its full dominion.

But even then he had been incapable of rising to the pitch of desire which had stirred him the night before. Perhaps it was the balance of sanity reasserting itself. Perhaps it was the result of that long, deep sleep which had robbed him of the night vision of the movements of the men of the Aurora Clan. Whatever it was, he decided definitely that

his vengeance upon Ivor McLagan could wait. There was all the summer for that. And meanwhile there was urgent work lying ahead of him in another direction. Perhaps a year more of these solitudes and his work would be finished. Yes, in that time he would have completed everything. And the while McLagan would have forgotten and lulled himself into a sense of security. Then, at his leisure——

So he had gone about his simple preparations. He prepared his boat down on the river. He loaded it with his camp outfit and provisioned it. Then he turned his ponies loose to fend for themselves on such mountain feed as they could find in his absence. And his trail dogs he treated in similar fashion. These creatures were subsidiary. His boat was the thing he knew and understood.

But this more temperate mood had been in the early morning. Since then there had been hours of labour on his journey down-stream. And the work of it had lightened the dullness of his earlier inspiration. By high noon he had been completely flung back upon his desire for the life of the man he had encountered in Beacon.

So he stood before the great bend of the river where the angry waters beat impotently against the foot of the mountain, and raced away to the south in search of the outlet they refused to be denied. And all his passion for revenge was burning deep behind his soulless eyes.

Why should he wait? Why should he deny himself? There was all summer for the rest as well as for that other. Why not reverse the thing? The rest could wait, far more easily wait than the vengeance he desired. It would be better so. For just so long as Ivor McLagan lived, he, Liskard, would never know peace of mind. What was it? At the most a ten or twelve mile portage to the north of

that hill. He had made it before when he had looked to discover for what purpose his neighbours were around. Yes. And the Alsek was an easy river. He could pass down it at his leisure until he came to the oil camp. He could cache his boat while he searched the place for the man whose life he desired. Then, if he were not there, but down at the river mouth where he had built his crazy home on the cliffs, he could pass on down beyond the camp in the night and stalk his quarry.

It would be easy. So easy. There would be no need to take chances. His rifle could do the job at his leisure. The man's home was perched up for long-range shots. He could remain under cover——

Yes. The rest could wait. It must wait. His desire was overwhelming, irresistible. He would eat at once and pass over to the landing he knew of at the foot of the mountain. The water was turbulent enough there. There were rapids of no mean proportions to be negotiated. But they were nothing to him. Nothing this river could show him could match his watercraft.

He moved back from the water's edge. His decision was final. So he prepared a fire for his noon meal.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE SUNSHINE

"I'M kind of glad you could run down, Peter. I've put that report through to our people. This is the message I handed 'em."

Ivor McLagan held out the copy of the message he had despatched from Beacon. And, while his assistant read it, he stood with narrowed eyes gazing down upon the wrecked vessel standing high out of the waters of the bay below.

He had not long returned from Beacon, and Peter Loby had made a special trip down the river to meet him. Deeply as McLagan was concerned for any further news his subordinate might have brought from the camp on the river, the wreck below had lost none of its interest for him. In fact, for some unexplained reason, it had taken even a firmer hold upon his imagination.

Curiosity had by no means a prominent place in his psychology. Ordinarily he was not seriously concerned for happenings which had no intimate relation to the affairs of his life. He was sufficiently self-centred in the work that was his to leave such a thing as the sudden appearance of a derelict of the sea, flung almost on his doorstep, a thing without more

than passing interest, after he had ascertained that no human life stood in need of his succour. But strangely enough the vessel lying upon its deathbed below him, claimed him with greater force than he would have cared to admit. His mind had been full of it on his journey into Beacon. Its memory had remained with him, and deeply increased its spell, as he made his report to Alan Goodchurch. And his journey back to his home on the cliffs had been made with haste inspired by the strange feeling of unrest with which the thought of those last moments he had spent on the deck of the vessel had filled him.

Now the wreck was standing out amidst its rugged surroundings, under a blaze of sunshine, and, as his gaze took in its details, his mind was full of questioning and unease. The condition of the vessel had apparently changed very little. The tides that had passed since his first visit to it had left it wholly undisturbed. Its sails were in worse shape, and their tattered remains fluttered and whipped furiously in the breeze, and sent the gulls screaming as they sought to find resting-place on the creaking yards. But he was not thinking of any of these things. No. He was thinking——

Peter looked up from his reading.

“That’s a good report, McLagan,” he conceded with a grin. “It’s a deal better done than mine. I surely guess that’ll set our folks smiling a mile wide.” He drew a deep breath. “Well, they can keep right on grinning. They’re on a bonanza, or I’m all sorts of a mutt.”

He gazed up into the face of his chief as he offered his frank comment and passed back the copy of the message.

“It makes me feel good,” he went on quickly, “standing around out here, perched right up on this darn rock, breathing good sea air, an’ soaking in

elegant sunshine with our play coming right. Makes the world seem right somehow. Makes me sort of feel I want to holler like a school kid on Thanksgiving Day. Oil? It's the most crazily wonderful thing in the world—when you strike it."

"Yes."

McLagan's response was without a shadow of the other's enthusiasm and Peter turned questioning. Instantly he realised the direction of his chief's gaze and the meaning of his preoccupation. He chuckled.

"I'd forgot that crazy barge," he said. Then he added: "You handed Goodchurch the dope?"

The difference in the attitude of these men was profoundly marked. The lean, practical oil man was alert and thrilling with the prospect lying ahead of the work they were both engaged upon. The wreck and the atmosphere of mystery which it had originally impressed upon him had entirely passed out of his concern. He had witnessed the wreck. He had explored it. He had shared in the risk of that first approach. But none of these things, not even the vision of the deserting rats, had been sufficient to persist in a mind absorbed in his lifetime's pursuit of oil. The affairs of the oil prospect were paramount with him, first, last, and all the time. And the report he had just perused represented something approaching the crowning of his life's work. But at that moment oil and coal were the two things farthest from McLagan's mind.

The latter moved away and approached the edge of the wide ledge upon which his hut was set. Peter moved up beside him and bit a chew of tobacco from the disreputable fragment of plug tobacco which he carried in his hip-pocket.

As McLagan nodded his gaze was still upon the wreck below.

"Surely," he said. "I handed it the best I could,

and Goodchurch guessed things would need looking into. He took down the name of the ship and its port of registration. He's wiring right away to the proper authority, and promised to get it broadcast by wireless. I asked him for that. You see, I kind of got a hunch the folks who quit that vessel might be glad to locate her—if they're alive. He reckons we'll likely get word from the owners. You know, Peter, I feel ther's a mighty queer story lying back of that wreck."

"You mean—the boats—and——"

McLagan shook his head. He was gazing out to sea now and stood abstractedly filling his pipe.

"No," he said. Then his eyes came back again to the scene of the wreck with the screaming sea-birds circling about it. "Psha!" he cried impatiently. "What's the use? Yes, the boats if you like. It's the whole darn thing. It's got me guessing so I can't forget it."

Peter chuckled.

"That's all right," he said. "It don't worry me a thing. It's oil for mine. You can play around with all the wrecks if you fancy that way. I'm beating it right back to camp."

McLagan nodded.

"Yes. It's oil, not wrecks, for you an' me," he said, as though striving to convince himself. "I know that. But—yes, you beat it right back to camp and I'll be along up the moment I touch the answer our folks send to that report. I'll just wait around for that. I'm figgering there'll be a big move on that new field when we get word. The drilling we're doing now looks like it'll be a circumstance to the thing coming. Maybe I'll even have to run down to Seattle, after I've made my own inspection. Still, that won't be till the late fall."

Peter agreed, his keen eyes lighting afresh.

"That's how it looks to me," he said.

"Yes. Are you stopping around to eat?"

"No. I'll make camp on the river. I'll pass up on slack water, and grab the tide later." Peter laughed and nodded down at the wreck. "You'll get another look at that while you're waiting reply from our folks," he observed slyly.

"Sure I will." McLagan looked round quickly as he thrust his pipe into the corner of his mouth, and his strong jaws shut tight on its well-bitten stem. "Just as soon as you beat it."

"I thought so." Peter was chuckling. "Well, it doesn't rattle me a thing. The only thing worrying me is the yarn lying back of the coal belt we've located. I'm sure crazy to get after that. So—I'll beat it. So long."

McLagan smiled at the other's thrust.

"So long, boy."

He stood gazing after the slim figure of his lieutenant as he hurried towards the head of the pathway down from the ledge on which they were standing. He waited till the last of his cloth cap vanished below the level. Then he lit his pipe and turned again to his absorbed contemplation of the mystery boat below.

The breeze was dead flat. It was low water. In something under an hour the tide would be starting its flood again. Meanwhile the sky had clouded over. But it was without any storming threat. It was only the fleecy shading which came so frequently with the change of tide.

Sasa Mannik's eyes had curiously widened as they gazed up into the face of the man he served. They were alight with all the superstitious fear of his kind. He had just concluded a long and almost incoherent protest which his boss's demand for his assistance aboard the wreck had brought forth.

McLagan's face was frowning. His eyes were coldly contemptuous. He stood a towering figure over the sturdy little man who was in open revolt.

"You're worse than a darn fool, Sasa," he said sharply. "You're a low, miserable coward. You're the worst coward I know. You're such a coward you'd run a mile from a jack rabbit. You make me sick to death, and I feel like sending you to hell out of my service. I tell you there's not a thing to this poor darn wreck to scare a buck louse. There's not a thing. She's dead and done, and there's not a living soul aboard." Then he changed his tone from condemnation to derision. "What the hell scares you about her? What d'you think she's got aboard her? Devils or—what?"

The half-breed turned away. He glanced down at his own boat lying half out of water on the smooth surface of the rocks on which it had been hauled up. Perhaps he desired to reassure himself it was still there for his safe retreat. A moment later he turned again to the whiteman. And from him he gazed up at the high sides of the great vessel which loomed monstrously as they stood on the slippery rocks below it. And as he gazed up at the hated object his eyes further widened, and he spoke in a tone that was almost a whine.

"Maybe, boss," he said. He shook his dark head vigorously. "This thing bad. So bad. I see him same lak you see him, too. I know. It in your eye when you look. You scare, too, plenty. You not know. I know. I much coward this thing. Nothing else I scare lak him dis. I not go aboard. Never."

McLagan's gaze was compelling. He held the other while he put his question.

"This thing? What did you see?" he asked sharply.

The half-breed shifted his position uneasily. He sought to avoid the whiteman's questioning eyes.

He turned away. But his fearful eyes came swiftly back to those they had sought to avoid.

"I not speak this thing," he said, in a low, surly tone. "It bad. What you ask him? You see. Oh, yes. I know."

He made a movement. It was almost like a shudder. Then without waiting he passed down to his boat.

"Sasa !"

McLagan's voice brought the terrified creature to a standstill. He turned and waited. And then he heard the whiteman laugh as he flung his final orders.

"You take your boat and go back to the beach. You wait there till I hail you. If you leave that beach till I hail you I'll beat the life out of you. Now go."

McLagan had made no further attempt at investigation of the secrets of the wrecked vessel. It was with an unusual feeling of repulsion that he climbed up through the gloomy precincts of the forepeak. And somehow the memory of the half-breed's accusation stung him sharply, as, involuntarily, his searching gaze sought to penetrate the darkness surrounding him. In his heart he felt the man was not without justification in his charge. From the moment he had set foot on the ladder a strange sensation took hold of him, and, with every upward step, he wondered what revelation the next would yield.

Once on deck, however, the uncanny sensation passed. Here was daylight. Here were the things he knew and recognised. But somehow he did not want to use the forepeak again, and forthwith he set about discovering some other means of reaching the deck.

He found it quickly. It was there, lying amidst some sprawled gear upon the deck, beside a stack of

lumber. It was a long rope companion ladder with broad teakwood steps. It was still secured to the down haul cleats against the ship's rail near the main-mast where it had evidently been flung by some previous user. And he dropped it over the vessel's side, and saw that it reached almost to the rocks below.

His view was out over the bay. And from where he stood he could see his hut perched high on the cliffs, and, below, the long, low line of the distant beach. He smiled to himself as he beheld the figure of Sasa busy mooring his fishing boat. He knew that, for all his rebellious mood, the half-breed would very literally obey his final orders.

He turned away. His searching gaze took in the deck in every direction. It was the same, precisely, as he had found it on his first visit. The litter of gear was in evidence everywhere. The stacked lumber. There was the canvas-sheathed winch with its close-hauled raking arm. The galley with its steel door ajar. Then the closely-battened main hatch, and, beyond it, the break of the small poop-deck above, with its two alleyways, one to the cabin, and one to the half-deck on the starboard side. Yes. It was all just as he had left it, and he glanced quickly up at the sky.

There was a thin overcast of cloud, but still without any threat of storm. Even the restless ocean breeze had flattened out, and the usually protesting gear above him was completely silent.

McLagan had told himself that he wanted to explore the hundred and one details which he knew must have escaped him at his first visit. There were the battened holds. There were those cabins which Peter and the half-breed had looked into. There was the pantry, and the half-deck. All these things he had promised himself to look into. It was his excuse for his visit. But he knew that in reality they

had little enough to do with his coming now. It was that other thing which had brought him there. That thing which had inspired terror in the half-breed's heart, and—— He moved over to the cabin alleyway and leant against the break of the poop. And he stood gazing down the deck in the direction of the winch as he had stood there once before.

For all Sasa's challenge McLagan's nerve was completely unruffled. He was a man of cool courage and utterly ungiven to vain imaginings. Imagination was by no means lacking, but it was under the perfect control of a completely healthy mind.

He remained for some time in the position he had taken up, and smoked contentedly for all the expectancy in his eyes. But after awhile, wearying of his vigil, he moved away, and squatted himself on the battened hatch in precisely the position which Sasa Mannik had once occupied. Here he hunched himself with his arms locked about his knees, and sat regarding the long prospect of the littered deck.

The trend of his thought had remained unchanged. And the look in his eyes retained its unvarying expectancy, even when now and again he turned them skywards searching the summer shading. Time seemed to concern him not at all. That presently the flood tide would begin, and there might be difficulty for Sasa to bring his boat alongside, did not seem to enter his thought. He sat there completely preoccupied with the thing that was in his mind, and luxuriating in the comfort of his pipe.

Suddenly he started. And his watchful eyes changed from expectancy to a flashing alertness. A sound had broken up the perfect quiet. It was a sound that had no relation to creaking gear, or the flap of sail-cloth, or the raucous screaming of sea-fowl. Seemingly it had no relation to anything he understood. For he remained precisely where he

was, waiting, while his eyes focussed on the spot whence the sound came.

It came from nearby to the main-mast. It came from somewhere just abreast of the carefully covered winch. There was the galley entrance there, and beyond that a stack of stowed lumber——

He started to his feet, and the look in his eyes had changed again. He was smiling. A head had appeared over the vessel's rail. It was a head adorned by a woman's modish hat, with, underneath it, a face the sight of which filled him with nothing but delight. He hurried down the deck.

"Why, say, Claire," he cried. "How did you——? Here, wait. Get a grip on my hand. You just shouldn't have——"

There was a moment of effort while McLagan took firm hold of the girl's two small hands. Then after a struggle, a little breathlessly, she jumped lightly down from the rail and stood beside him on the deck.

"I just had to come, Ivor," she cried, gazing curiously about her while she made her explanation. "I heard about it in town, and set out right away. Mum's back there with the car on the hill road, and I came along down to the beach where I saw your man with his boat." She laughed. "He didn't want to, but I made him. I asked for you, and he said you were aboard here. I asked him why, and he said because you were 'dam fool whiteman'. Then I guess I offered him five dollars to bring me across, and he nearly threw a fit. He refused. But I insisted. It cost me ten before I was through, and the threat you'd beat him if he didn't. Even then he tried to dodge it and guessed you'd beat him if he left the beach. But I got my way. And——"

"As you mostly do."

McLagan was thinking rapidly and with sudden deep concern. This girl was all the world to him, and

her presence, her proximity filled him with a wild sensation of joy that he was powerless to deny, that he made no attempt to deny. But, of a sudden, he had become horrified as he contemplated the real purpose of his own visit to the derelict. In a moment his mind was made up. By some means he must get her off the ship before—before——

There was no smile in his eyes now.

"I kind of wish you hadn't, Claire. I guess I'll have to deal with Sasa for disobeying his orders. He was told not to quit that beach for—anything."

The girl looked up into the man's face and the flash of hot resentment in her eyes was unmistakable. But she shook her head and refused the impulse his roughness, his downright rudeness had stirred in her. Somehow she always found it easy to make excuse for him.

"The same. Always the same," she said impatiently, for all the smile she forced herself to. "Some day, Ivor, you'll wake up and wonder the reason you were built with a rough tongue and a foolish grouch."

The man glanced quickly at the sky. Then he indicated the main hatch where he had been squatting and led the way towards it. He seated himself and left the girl standing. And promptly seized on the opening she had given him, and sought to drive home his purpose. At all costs he must get her away before——

"There's times when a rough tongue's needed. When a grouch is surely dead right," he said, without any softening. "Is it right for women to give way to a sort of low curiosity to look into the trouble and bad luck helpless folk are up against? You came for that, Claire," he said deliberately; "it was a swell drive out of Beacon to pass an idle time. I kind of wouldn't have thought it of you."

It was one of those moments when the engineer felt that somehow he ought to have done better. He wanted to drive this girl away. And on the spur of the moment it was the only thing he could think of. He wanted to get her off that vessel without explanation. And so he designed to anger her as the simplest, most direct method of achieving his purpose.

But the whole thing missed fire for the reason that Claire was shrewd, and knew him, and because her reason for coming was something which had far deeper object than the idle curiosity of which he accused her.

The blaze of anger he had expected was not forthcoming. Claire's colour heightened, and her soft blue eyes were less wide as she gazed down into his plain, unsmiling face. Then the corners of her mouth dropped. And somehow her whole expression suggested distress to the man who so absolutely worshipped her. She shook her head slowly.

"Not curiosity, Ivor," she said. "Not that." Then a shadowy smile lit her eyes. "And as for the swell drive to pass an idle time, I'd have said you knew the Beacon trail better than that. If you don't, why, just ask Mum, and get a look at the tires of our automobile. If you'd had someone you guessed the sun rose and set in who was travelling home to you in a ship that's never been heard of since she handed out an S.O.S., why it seems to me you'd feel like chasing the ends of the earth to get a look at any old wreck that blew in on to the rocks from Australia to the Arctic. Curiosity?" she cried scornfully. "Well, you can call it that way if you fancy it. I'm here because I couldn't live with peace in my mind till I knew this boat wasn't the one that should have brought our Jim back to us."

The girl's reply drove a wave of contrition surging

through the man's heart. He felt as though he had struck her a blow in the face. He felt as though he wanted to flee before the gentle reproach he interpreted in the look in her half-smiling eyes. And yet—— He glanced uneasily up at the sky.

"Your Jim's ship was the *Imperial* of Bristol, Claire. You told me that months back," he expostulated. "This is the *Limpet* of Boston. Your Jim wouldn't have been aboard a coaster like this. Beating it from Australia he'd have been on a swell ocean-going vessel. Goodchurch knew all about this wreck. You must have got its name. I'd handed him the story myself and all the details. He should have told you and saved you from the Beacon trail. Say, little girl, I'm sorry I handed you that. I didn't think, or—— You see, I know all your brother meant to you. We've talked about it, you and me, and maybe I ought to have guessed right away when I saw your dandy face peeking over that darn old rail."

Again he looked anxiously up at the sky as a crack of the tattered sails warned him that the breeze was springing up with the flood tide.

"But I just tell you we daresn't stop around here. You don't know this bay like Sasa and I do. The tide's setting in, and in a few minutes ther'll be no getting off these rocks in Sasa's boat or any other. It's the most devilish place in the world. It was that current that caught and drove this poor blamed barge high and dry. We must get away right—— Eh?"

The girl had suddenly reached out a pointing finger. She had clutched his arm violently.

"My God! What's—that?"

The cry broke from her in a low, almost inarticulate fashion. She was standing facing down the deck, her horrified gaze fixed on a spot on the deck in line with the canvas-sheathed winch. Her

face had blanched to ashen whiteness, and the arm held out pointing was shaking like an aspen.

McLagan was on his feet beside her, and somehow her clutching hand had fallen into one of his. He held it tightly as he, too, gazed down the deck in the beam of sunlight which had broken through the haze of cloud which the breeze had stirred.

"What do you see?" he cried quickly, in a low, suppressed tone. "Tell me, Claire. I want to know. I can see it, too. But I want to know the thing you see."

"It's—it's the shadow—of a man. See?" The girl was staring straight in front of her and her voice was faltering. But the arm she still held out had steadied under the influence of McLagan's presence and touch. "Oh," she went on with a gasp. "He's coming towards us. I—I can't stand it. He's big, too, and—and—Oh, God!—for pity's sake, Ivor, take me away—take me away!"

But the man made no attempt to obey her. Instead his words came gently and full of confidence and encouragement.

"Stand your ground, little girl," he urged. "Quit your scare. I'm right here, and nothing's going to do you hurt. It was this I was trying to save you from. The sight of it. It'll pass with the sun. It's just a queer shadow, and doesn't mean a thing—to hurt. I've seen it before, and know about it. It's the sun makes us see it. But it's queer. It hasn't a thing to do with the gear above. Look. It's outline's in the air. An' it's shadow's on the deck. See? It's the outline of a man, a big man. He's carrying something in two hands. You can't see what it is. You can't see any face. Just an outline. And he's walking this way and don't come any nearer. Isn't it queer? What is it? A spook, or—or a trick of the sun? Say, it's queer. Ah." He drew a deep

breath. "Look, it's fading out. It's going with the sun. Look. That's better. Now—now it's gone."

The sun had suddenly passed behind the clouds again. And as it did so the shadow had completely disappeared.

Claire drew a deep sigh. On the instant the man's arm was flung out to her support. But it was unnecessary. For all the ghastly hue of her cheeks, the utter pallor of her lips, the girl was not of the fainting sort. He watched the slow return of her colour with anxious, troubled eyes.

Suddenly she spoke. Her eyes were still on the spot where the terrifying shadow had moved so meaninglessly.

"Let's—let's get away, Ivor," she said, in a low, hushed tone. "It—it was a ghost—a—I—I——"

McLagan resorted to the only thing his mind suggested. He laughed. He felt it was the only thing in face of the girl's condition.

"I guess it's a mighty harmless spook, anyway," he said lightly. "The poor darn thing's pinned right down to that spot. He hasn't moved a yard since I first located him days back. But maybe you're right though, kid. Ther's no sort of use standing around gawking at a fool spectre that hasn't sense but to stand around waiting to show himself when the sun shines. He ought to know better. Moonlight's his play-time. Yes, come right along, and we'll beat it back to your Mum."

For all the man's banter he hurried the girl down the deck carefully avoiding the spot where the shadow had stood. They stood for a moment at the down-haul cleats, and Claire looked back over the deck. She felt safer here. There was McLagan, big and smiling. And there, beside her, was the means of retreat.

"I guess I'm not brave, Ivor," she smiled a little

pathetically. "When it comes to that sort of thing I'm like dead mutton. I'm not scared of a thing living. But the dead——"

"Dead?"

Claire nodded.

"Sure. Someone was killed right there. A big man. Do you wonder this vessel blew right in here without a soul on board? I don't."

She turned to the rail and the man moved to her assistance.

"Can you manage that ladder, Claire?" He had no comment to offer concerning her summing up of the thing they had both witnessed. His only desire at the moment was her safe departure from the mystery boat and its haunting. "Can you?" he went on.

Then of a sudden he reached out and caught her slight body in his arms. In a moment he had lifted her on to the rail and held her safely while she set her feet on the rungs of the ladder beyond it. He waited while she lowered herself step by step. He was still holding her warm, soft hands firmly in his when her now smiling, thankful eyes came on a level with his.

"It's all right, Ivor," she nodded. "Guess I'm safe now. My but you're strong lifting me that way. You're coming right along down, too."

"Yes," he said. "Sure I am." For an instant the blood surged to his head. The pretty eyes, the sweet face were so near, so very near to his. But slowly it receded, and, as the girl passed below the rail, McLagan drew a deep breath. He turned abruptly. His gaze was down the deck where the shadow had been. Then he glanced at the sky. The next moment he passed over the ship's rail and followed the girl.

CHAPTER XV

THE MAN FROM THE HILLS

THE labour of it was tremendous. The sturdy ponies were alather with sweat in the pleasant warmth of the summer day. Their burden ordinarily was sufficiently light. A rattling, aged buckboard driven by the man they had known for nearly five years. It contained no outfit, no burden of any sort but the reckless teamster who had literally made the trail by his own many journeys between his home and the city of Beacon Glory. But it was the final stage of the journey. A heart-bursting haul up an incline steeper than one in four.

At the summit was rest and feed in plenty. Unlike other men in the region using horse labour, McLagan cared for his ponies better than he would care for himself. He worked them to the limit if need be, but his care of them was the same. In his undemonstrative, unsentimental fashion he loved his shaggy, stocky Alaskan ponies, and saw to it that they knew it in the fashion they understood.

Already the crowning plateau of his home was in view through the gaunt arms of the tattered forest trees with which the track was lined. A hundred yards or so more and the labour of it would be over,

and the ardent creatures would snuff the ocean breeze in their gushing nostrils. The man's whip lay gently playing over the ponies' backs, urgent for their last ounce of effort. He was leaning forward on the hard-sprung seat as though to spare them weight. It was an instinctive attitude that was of no real help. It was the attitude of a man accustomed to the saddle.

McLagan was more urgent for his home just now than usual. He had gone into Beacon to meet the message he expected from his partners and employers. But that had been excuse. He had, in reality, made the journey for Claire Carver and her mother. On their return from the wreck in the bay they had discovered the girl's mother in a state of panic. The automobile had been put completely out of action by the terrible road over which it had passed. Not a single one of its tyres was standing up. The mother was helpless. The girl was in little better case. And McLagan did what he could in the way of repair. But it was quite useless. The outer covers were wrecked, and incapable of containing the inner tubes.

In the end McLagan was able to impress on them sufficiently the immediate necessity of himself making a visit to Beacon. He assured them he had long since planned it. That his business was pressing. And the good luck of it was that his buckboard would just carry the three of them, if they did not mind being somewhat packed into the seat and badly jolted. They had by no means minded. And the older woman sighed her relief as they planned to have a man sent out with new tyres to fetch in the derelict automobile.

"You know, Claire, girl," she had said, in her downright fashion, which no improvement in her fortunes had been able to modify, "them automobiles is liable to set folks thinkin' you're all sorts of a dame ridin'

around in 'em. But give me a team of decent mountain-bred plugs, with a bunch of grain inside 'em. Maybe they ain't a blue streak of lightnin', but they'll mostly get you there an' haul you back, which it's a God's truth is a thing you can only guess about with one of these oil cans. Ivor's wise. Maybe his business depends on his bein' there to do it. So he gambles on these dandy four-legged creatures."

And she had affectionately patted and stroked the warm flesh that was ready to help them in their emergency.

The man had had a better reward than he had looked for. He had found his reply awaiting him at the mail office. A reply that he had never hoped to get until the heads of the Mountain Oil Corporation had held an important meeting. He realised that it must have been despatched within a day of the receipt of his report. It was a clear, definite, decided reply such as pleased him mightily. It was from the chairman of the Board of Directors.

"Complete prospect earliest possible date. Sailing in ten weeks. Be with you early fall. Make all preparations for big forward move. Prospect for large territorial concession. Prepare everything. Big money."

The very brevity of the message was its greatest joy to McLagan. It was, he felt, the message of a big man unfettered by any smallness of consideration. His interpretation of it was no less big. To him it meant go right ahead, grab all you can, and to hell with the cost. And the engineer, being the man he was, needed no further urging. So he had spared his ponies on the home trail less than usual.

He reached the plateau just as the sunset was at the height of its glory beyond the bay. The waters

were dead flat, a mirror of liquid fire under the radiant light. Even the ugly, iron-bound coast was rendered something gracious for once in its ruthless existence.

He had planned as he came along, absorbed in the prospect that lay ahead of him. The whole thing was quite simple. Everything must be got ready. He must set out on a big trip round with Peter. They must make a broad survey. He would set out with Sasa to join Peter at the camp. He would close up his shanty and quit it for the summer, or, at least, until the Directors had completed their inspection. Early fall. They would be with him in early fall to settle the final details. That was nearly three months from now. Yes. He could get everything ready for them by that time.

Sasa took the hard-blowing team as it drew up at the log barn, and McLagan walked round the ponies and helped unhitch them.

"Turn 'em loose, boy," he said. "Let 'em get a roll, and feed 'em hay. Don't water 'em till they cool. Then set 'em in the barn and push their blankets on. Feed 'em corn in two hours."

He passed on to the door of his hut. But he paused on the way. As he stepped out into the open the wreck of the *Limpet* came into his view. In a moment he had forgotten everything else as the memory of his last visit to the derelict came back to him.

Somehow the whole episode had been put out of his mind by the text of the message he had received from his own people. It could not have been otherwise in a man of his temper and purpose. He was at the threshold of a tremendous achievement which years of infinite labour had brought to his hand. Peter Loby was the oil man, the expert creature who dealt in drills, and pipes, and the immediate localities for his operations. But it was McLagan whose knowledge and vision searched the territory. It was he

who had first realised the possibilities of that black belt of territory which he had sent Loby to explore. His whole horizon was bounded by such prospecting, just as Peter's was by oil. Yes, the news that these men of finance were ready to put themselves and their money behind his work had completely cleared his healthy brain of the cobwebs which his last visit to the *Limpet* had woven there.

Now, however, it was different. Just as the other had overwhelmed every other consideration, the sight of the derelict flung memory back upon those things which are never failing in their grip on human imagination.

He stood gazing down at the queer object and every vestige of his earlier enthusiasm for the work in hand faded out of his unsmiling eyes. He had forgotten. And now he remembered. And so he stood there, for all he was ready enough for the cooking food which Sasa had prepared, and which smelt so appetising on the still air.

The sun sank lower upon the horizon. It dipped into the sea and lit a broad path across the bosom of the waters. The circling gulls screamed out their night chorus before perching for their rest. And all the time, deeper and more surely, the fascination of that derelict below took hold of him.

At last McLagan stirred. He unfastened the pea-jacket it was his habit to wear. Then he raised one hand and the palm of it was passed across his forehead, thrusting back his cap in its gesture. He turned and called over his shoulder.

"Sasa!"

The half-breed came sturdily across to him from behind the hut. And he stood there beside him following the direction of his gaze till his own rested upon the remains of the *Limpet*.

"Your canoe. Your kyak. Is she in good shape?"

"Sure. Him all time same. I mak him so."

"You'll beat it up the river to-night. Get it?"

The dark-skinned creature looked up into the face of his boss. Then he turned away, for the whiteman was still gazing at the wreck below.

"You'll beat it up the river and fetch Mr. Loby right down here. You'll beat it quick. You'll tell him to have an outfit ready at the camp to go into the hills. He'll know just what I mean. But he's to come right—No. I'll write it. I'll give you a 'brief' to take to Mr. Loby. It's nearly low water now. You can ride up on the tide."

He turned to pass into the hut. But the half-breed detained him.

"Boss, you think dat ship all time. Yes. I know. I see him in your eye. Dam ship no good. Bad. I go, yes. You not go by dam ship with no man? You not go? No? It bad. So bad."

The man's tone was almost beseeching.

"You're a damned coward, Sasa, as I told you before," McLagan laughed as he turned away. "You're a damned coward about anything but the big water. You get busy right away. You've got to have Mr. Loby down here early to-morrow. I'll write that brief for you."

The Alsek River had none of the greatness or splendour of its southern neighbour, the Lias. But then it flowed through a far different territory as it approached its mouth. Its lower reaches were marsh and tundra-bounded. It was a deep, sluggish channel occupying the lowest level in the heart of a wide muskeg, some thirty or forty miles in extent. Higher up, however, amidst the great hills, where lay the camp of the Mountain Oil Corporation, it lacked nothing of the scenic beauty of the hundreds of mountain creeks and rivers which scored the coast territory

of the Alaskan hills. In spring, under the fierce freshets, it was a roaring, blustering watercourse without mercy for any obstructions in its path. In summer it was a shallow, shoaly stream of guile and treachery.

Cy Liskard regretted the river he had made his own as his light craft passed out of the hill country and entered upon the flat of muskeg, which would continue until the barrier hills of the coast were reached. The Alsek River was not only ugly to him. It was a good deal more. He knew that the vivid, brilliant green of this limitless plain was one of Nature's vilest snares. It was one vast, treeless swamp, thinly disguised by an alkali crust, and as bottomless as only a northern muskeg can be. It was without life, animal or human. Only was it swarming with wildfowl, for whom it was a never-failing refuge from trap and gun.

But he laboured indefatigably. He was running with the stream, his muscles at ease, but with mind and eye alert and uneasy. He knew the dangers of this dreary channel. It was deep enough. Oh, yes. He knew that. At times it was monstrously deep. But its sodden, reed-grown banks yielded no footing for landing; there were mud banks dotted throughout its course; and in its open channels masses of submerged weed flourished abundantly. So his vigilance was unceasing, and he drove a course whose constant zig-zag suggested incompetence.

But there was no incompetence in Cy Liskard on the water. He travelled swiftly and without doubt or hesitation. For he meant to reach those distant coast hills with the last of the tide, driven hard by that which lay back of his mind.

His search for his quarry about the oil camp in the hills had been fruitless. He had prosecuted it with infinite determination. He had lain cached when he

encountered McLagan's river men. He had well and truly covered his tracks, when, at night, he had reconnoitred the camp itself. Then, when he had ascertained beyond all possibility of doubt that the man he sought was not at the camp, he had passed on all undetected, unsuspected. Now he was on the last stages of his journey to the coast. The coast, and that crazy, high-perched shanty overlooking the bay.

Cy Liskard betrayed no outward sign. He looked to belong to the long trail of the wilderness whose peace and calm his soulless eyes expressed so well. His outfit looked to be the outfit of those who live by trap and gun, and the protruding muzzle of a modern rifle over the curved bows of his craft increased the illusion. But his purpose was no less for these things. Perhaps, even, it was the contrary.

The miles passed rapidly behind him. They drifted away on a winding course that flashed and gleamed in the brilliant summer daylight. But for all his speed the outlook seemed to remain the same, the distant hills to come no nearer.

But they were approaching very rapidly. And, as the late afternoon ripened the sparkle of earlier day, at last they rose abruptly till their height seemed to overwhelm the monotonous level of the muskeg.

Now the watchful eyes became less watchful. The need was less. The level, sodden banks had given place to sharp-cut, solid granite, and the widened stream had slackened and given place to deep, clear water free of all hidden traps. A sense of ease and safety permitted the man's attention to wander to that which lay ahead and about him.

The river bent sharply away to the right behind the first of the foothills and doubled its breadth. Farther on was a leftward sweep. And as he approached it he realised that he no longer had the river to himself. A canoe—an Eskimo kyak—had swung round the

far bend, on the outer circle of it, and was driving like an arrow against the sluggish stream.

Just for an instant there was hesitation, and the dip of Cy Liskard's paddle was less unruffled. Then, seemingly, the man's doubt passed and he kept straight on. He made no attempt to hail the stranger. He never even permitted his gaze to turn in his direction. But nothing escaped the search of his pale eyes.

He had recognised the man in the kyak for what he was. He had seen him before. Something of an Eskimo or Indian. A sturdy, squat figure, with broad, fleshy shoulders and lank black hair, and eyes that might have been the folds of a crease in the flesh of his ugly face had it not been for the deep sockets in which they were set.

Oh, yes. He had seen him before. And he let him pass him without word or greeting.

The mouth of the Alsek River from the land side was a curious and interesting effect of erosion. Even granite, that almost invincible barrier which Nature sets up against the onslaught of her own fierce elements, had ultimately yielded. The river on the one side and the storming seas on the other had beaten upon the granite anvil till the white flag of surrender had been hoisted.

The attacking elements had met through a narrow gap which had helped to set the scene for the appalling race of tide which swept in through it. Two gaunt, barren headlands stood sentry on either side with less than three hundred yards of water dividing them. Outside these lay the bay with its guarding headlands and a multitude of rocky warriors still defending. Inside was an expanse of water that was nearly a mile wide. This was no less rockbound than the outer bay. But it was completely sheltered so that no

view of the bay beyond could be obtained except that which was visible through the narrow opening.

It was early morning. The sun had just lifted above the eastern hills. Nature was astir. The restless sea-fowl were breaking their fast upon such fare as the waters provided, and sunrise had brought up with it a freshening breeze. The night tide was rapidly running out and the race of water was still fierce, and strong, and threatening.

Cy Liskard was laboriously clambering along the foreshore of the inner cove. He was moving up towards the headland guarding the southern shore of the river mouth. He was searching for the most promising direction whence he could attack its lofty summit.

Such was the nature of the shore that his movements were largely hidden. It was the thing he desired most. Now he was passing along in the shadow of mountainous boulders. Now he was full in the open, scaling a barrier impossible otherwise to pass. But he was making progress, rapid progress onwards and upwards. He had swiftly realised the danger of passing the gateway on the open water. It would have been to court discovery on the instant, to say nothing of the chances of disaster from the race of the tide. So his boat lay cached behind him, while he confronted the task of scaling the headland.

The man was standing on the windswept crest of the southern guardian of the river. He was sheltering from observation behind a boulder, and from the whip of the breeze which stung with a wintry bite. The whole of the great bay lay there below him, calm, and peaceful, and completely inviting. He was gazing down upon it, but without regard for its austere beauty. For that he had no interest whatever. The ravishing shimmer of the summer waters, the

tattered magnificence of the element's aged battleground. These things were matters of complete indifference to him. Even his view of McLagan's high-perched home for the moment seemed to make no claim.

His searching gaze was preoccupied with the thing he had never looked to discover. He was gazing down upon the wreck of the *Limpet* lying upon its death-bed of rocks, which the night ebb had left bare. He was studying it, searching it, shape, and rig, and every detail as might some sailorman who still retains all his interest for a calling he has long since abandoned.

For a long time he stood in the shelter of the boulder. And the fascination of the wreck held him until its spell was abruptly broken by a thing of more immediate consequence. Suddenly he became aware of a small boat making its way from the north shore in the direction of the wreck. And in a moment he understood. He raised his eyes to the house on the cliffs. He dropped them again to the beach below. Then they came again to the moving boat with its solitary occupant.

Cy Liskard had made the great descent. Now he was standing in the shadow of the vessel lying upon the rocks, gazing up at the lettering of her name on her bluff bows. Some distance away behind him lay an empty dinghy hauled clear of the lapping waters.

The man had approached the vessel in a mood that was sheerly exulting. Here, undoubtedly, was his goal at last. It was a different goal from that which he had expected. But that was of no consequence. He had watched the dinghy behind him approach the rocks. He had seen the man leap out of it and haul it clear of the water. Then he had seen him

approach the derelict and climb on board it. There was no mistake. He had recognised that tall, powerful figure on the instant. It was impossible for him to mistake it, even though it had been clad differently that night at the Speedway. He felt that he had his man in a trap. And it was a trap from which he had no intention of letting him escape.

There was a curious look in his pale eyes as he stared up at the vessel's name. For once they had been stirred out of their customary expressionlessness. There was something almost like a smile in them. But it was shadowy. It was of the vaguest. And it only contrived to transform them into something tigerish.

At last he turned away. And as he did so a harsh sound broke from his lips. It might have been a short, hard laugh, only that not a muscle of his face had stirred. He moved slowly down the vessel's length till he came to the rope ladder amidships. Then he paused. He thrust one hand into the pocket of his closely buttoned pea-jacket and produced a heavy pistol. It was an automatic, and he examined its loading carefully. Then, with a hunching movement of his broad shoulders, and a quick, frowning upward glance at the blazing sun, he seized the rope ladder and set foot on its bottom rung.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAZARET

THE last of the daylight had only just passed. It was nearing midnight, and the sky was clear, and with every moment the night lights of the heavens were gaining power. Already a moving belt of Northern Lights had made its spectre-like appearance above the horizon, and the rare, clear atmosphere was ideal for their perfect development.

It was a wide flat in the hills something removed from the highway of the Alsek River, and, dotted about it, were the shadowy outlines of the box-like human habitations, and the litter of a wide-flung oil camp. Here and there could clearly be seen the upstanding machinery of the drills with which the earth's bosom had already been pierced.

It was in the doorway of one of the shanties that the lean figure of Peter Loby was lounging. He was only partly dressed. He had been suddenly roused from his blankets, with only sufficient time to haul on a pair of earth-stained moleskin trousers. His first keen resentment at the breaking of his night's rest had passed. He had completed the reading of the brief note which had promptly been thrust

into his hands. But his manner still remained short enough.

"What in hell made you push this at me now, Sasa?" he protested. "We can't start down that darn river till daylight, anyway. We need all the light if we're to get through the muskeg bottom right. What's keeping McLagan down there? Seems to me it's dead waste me going down to the coast only to make back again."

His resentful gaze took in the sturdy figure of the half-breed. But his words were rather an angry expression of his feelings than an invitation to the messenger to attempt explanation. Sasa Mannik, however, took the whiteman literally.

"I do as boss McLagan say," he replied, in his halting fashion. "He say, 'I mak' this brief. You give it boss Loby right away. Then you bring him right down quick. Early to-morrow.' We mak' him trip right now? Then you speak boss McLagan early to-morrow. The muskeg nothing. Not nothing. I know dis thing sure. You mak fix all thing now? Yes?"

The half-breed's urgency was something more than his orders suggested. His eyes were wider than their wont. Altogether the man seemed to Peter to be disturbed.

"What is it, Sasa?" Peter's manner was less irritated. Something he saw in the coloured man's eyes left him curious. "Has anything happened that your boss hasn't set in this letter?"

The half-breed looked away behind him in the direction of the faintly-outlined hill behind which lay the river where his treasured kyak was securely cached. It was a native mannerism of unease.

"I not know the thing that 'brief' say," he said evasively, after a moment's thought. "Oh, no. You tell me, then I know. I not read the thing

boss McLagan mak. I know all thing I see. I know all thing whiteman do. Oh, yes. The boss say I bring you down quick. I mak that. It good too, yes."

"What d'you mean?"

Peter was studying the dark face intently.

"I think it good you come—quick."

"Why?"

The half-breed shrugged. Then his hands moved in an expressive gesture.

"One thing. Two thing. I mak think it good you come quick," he said. "Boss McLagan go by big ship. All the devil mans get him, sure. Plenty devil mans by big ship. I know. I see him. Him call boss all time so he go crazy, sure. Boss look at him ship. He hear him call. All time call. So boss mak forget all thing. Him mak this trip with me this night? Oh, no. Devil man call him quick. Him listen. It not good. Boss go right down by big ship, so devil man kill him all up. Sure. One thing."

The worried man raised a lean, dark finger to count the item. Then he raised a second finger beside the first.

"Two thing," he went on. And now the widening of his eyes lessened. They closed to slits from which all his superstitious awe had passed. "I not know this two thing sure," he said thoughtfully. "I just think him. I mak up dis river. I meet canoe. I see dis man, I tell you an' boss McLagan. Him dis man I see one time, two time, by the coast. Him go down river. I come right here. What him mak go down river I not guess. He bad man. Much bad. I see him eye look all time bad. Him eye lak devil-fish. Oh, yes. Bad. Why him go down river? I not know. Him look all time for some thing. I not know. You mak this trip right now, quick. Then

we mak him coast so quick this bad man not know us there. No." He pointed in a low easterly direction. "Him sun by that place, then us with boss McLagan sure. I go lak hell quick."

Peter Loby wanted to laugh at the simple earnestness of this creature whose benighted mind was so full of the spectres his forbears had bred into it. He wanted to deride out of his superiority and enlightenment. But somehow he refrained from doing so.

"You say you don't know this man? Yet you're plumb sure he's bad? Why?" he asked sharply.

Sasa's gesture was full of profound contempt for the limitations of these "crazy whitemen."

"You shoot up fox. You shoot up wolf," he said. "You not eat him. Why? Him good meat, sure. Whiteman not eat him. Eskimo not eat him, only when he starve. So. You see good man. You say 'good'! You see bad man. You say 'bad.' Why? All man do much thing him not know why. Why?" The brown finger was raised again, and it tapped the man's broad, low forehead with its stubby tip. "It here. This man bad. So bad. I say him. You come quick?"

Peter nodded.

"All right. Get right back to your boat, Sasa," he said resignedly. "Get her all ready. I'll be along right away. How'll the tide serve down below."

"Him good. We mak him in dead water," Sasa said, with a quick, ready nod. His air of relief at having persuaded the whiteman was almost child-like. "I go mak ready right away. I mak dis trip so dam quick."

Ivor McLagan stared about him in the feeble light of his hurricane lantern. It was the lazaret of the *Limpet*. A smallish apartment between decks,

with an entrance through a trap in the deck above, which was also the floor of the steward's pantry. He had just descended the ladder and stood gazing upon the iron tanks with their tightly-screwed-down manholes.

The place contained four of these. Their purpose was obvious enough even to his landsman's mind. They were food containers for biscuit and flour, and such supplies as must be kept safe from the rats with which the vessel had swarmed.

But the place contained other things besides. There were packing cases, and chests of various sizes littered about all round him. There were barrels, too, which he shrewdly suspected contained salted meat, beef and pork. Some of the chests were empty. Some were still nailed fast. Each of the barrels was obviously as it had been originally shipped and stowed.

He stood there for some contemplative moments. He had come there to search this place thoroughly as he intended to search the rest of the vessel. But he had discovered this storage of food supplies quite accidentally, and with no suspicion of its existence. It is even doubtful if he had ever heard of a ship's lazaret. While examining the steward's pantry above he had observed the trap in the deck, and forthwith had proceeded with his investigations.

Now he was considering the best means of examination. A shaft of daylight came down through the trap above him and he had his lantern. But the double resource left the place ill-lit and difficult. After awhile he found an iron hook suspended from the deck above, and promptly availed himself of it. He hung his lantern thereon and instantly appreciated the added illumination so gained. He moved slowly amongst the litter. Right at his feet lay two chests of stout make. They were different from the

rest scattered about. They were iron-bound and of dark, heavy wood. Their iron bonds had been cut and the lids thrown back, and they were quite empty. He bent down over these and examined the lids closely. There was no stencilling upon them to give any clue to their source. There was no address of any sort.

He left them, passing on to the rest in deliberate and careful succession. He had made up his mind that nothing should remain unexamined. For, he argued, here were the ship's stores, and these stores might give him some clue as to whence they came. An address. A purveyor's business name. Anything and everything of such a nature might surely help materially in solving the mystery that so profoundly intrigued him.

For a while his search was unproductive of information, although in another direction it was not without interest. Each chest he had discovered had had *all markings carefully erased with a scraper*. Why?

It was a curious discovery. It was deeply significant. To McLagan's acute mind there was but a single answer. The whole thing suggested secrecy. Again why? After turning over the last chest he stood up and gazed about him, and, in the stuffy heat of the place, he passed a hand across his sweating forehead. But his gesture was in reality one of perplexity and had no relation to the heat. Clearly there was only one thing to be done. After he had explored the sealed tanks he must examine the contents of those cases that still remained full. They might contain canned fruit or milk. Anyway, something which would clearly tell him its source.

Yes. He would first unseal those tanks, and essay the negotiation of those narrow manholes. Then——

He had started to cross over to the nearest tank

when his eyes chanced upon a portion of an old packing case lying in an obscure corner. There was a square of white upon it. In the doubtful light he could not be certain what the latter was. But it looked like the thing for which he had been so long searching. It looked like an address ticket. He stooped and picked it up.

It was the thing he hoped. But—— In his profound amazement he found himself muttering the address upon it aloud :

“Capt. Julian Caspar, Sailing Ship, *Imperial* of Bristol, Perth, Western Australia.”

At the bottom of the address card was the name of a firm of wine merchants in “Perth, W.A.”, and at the top of it, in block lettering, was the usual “With Care.”

He stood gazing at it for a long time. His thought was travelling rapidly. In a moment he had realised that this piece of wood belonged to none of the open cases he had examined. It was probably something left over from some previous voyage, and, remaining in its corner, had so escaped the careful obliteration of address and markings to which the remainder of the stores had been submitted.

But the name of the ship on the address startled him beyond words. *Imperial* of Bristol. It was the name of the ship in which Claire’s brother Jim had set sail for home. How came it on board the *Limpet* of Boston ?

Again came that gesture of perplexity. Then of a sudden his eyes lit. He moved directly under the lantern and read again the address on the card. This time he spelt the name of the ship over quite slowly and aloud. Then he began another spelling, and it was the name on the wreck itself.

“*L-I-M-P-E-T*,” he muttered. Then after a pause : “*I-M-P-E*. Yes. Then there’s the *L* sure. Boston. Bristol. Gee ! Looks like it’s——”

He broke off with a startled upward glance in the direction of the hatch above. Just for an instant he remained listening acutely. Then he dropped the wood from his hands and it fell with a clatter on the deck at his feet. He reached up and snatched the lantern from the hook and extinguished it. There was a sound. It was the faint stealing sound as of someone cautiously approaching along the deck above him.

Who could it be? Loby? Sasa? No. He had no expectation of their return till afternoon. Claire? He remembered Claire's unexpected visit. She was not likely to repeat it. It would not be Claire. No. Who then? He remembered the ghostly shadow that had terrified Claire and the half-breed. And, for the first time in his life, he experienced that thrill of the nerves which the uncanny rarely fails to inspire even in the hardest.

Then came the full and unpleasant realisation of his position. One glance round him in the twilight warned him of his disadvantage. Here, in the lazaret, he was like a rat in a trap. He had no idea of who it could be above. But that which his senses had told him left him with a feeling of detestation for such a position. He turned promptly to the iron ladder.

"You're covered, McLagan. You're covered sure as death. The moment you show your darn head above that hole I'll blow it plumb to small meat."

McLagan drew back. There was no thrill of the nerves in him now. It was not the uncanny that held him. He knew that voice on the instant. It was the voice of Cy Liskard. And he understood that the man had a score to settle with him, and had come to settle it.

His position was desperate. He was armed. His automatic was fully loaded. But it was useless.

Quite useless. For the man above had not shown himself in the aperture of the trap.

The man from the hills was standing in the cabin alleyway with his back to the main deck. He was facing the door of the steward's pantry with a clear view of the open trap of the lazaret. But he, himself, was sufficiently clear of it to stand in no risk of gunfire on the part of the man he had trapped there. His gun was ready in his hand. No man could hope to ascend the ladder of the lazaret and get the first shot in. He knew that, and, for the moment, was quite content. Now he was talking, and a curious light had replaced the deadness usually looking out of his eyes.

"I didn't guess to find you here, McLagan," he said. "I didn't think to find this wreck lying around. But I've come many miles to find you, and pay the thing I owe you. I humped it into Beacon to buy a 'time.' I was out to buy it in a fashion you oil folks don't guess about. I was there to pay for it in dollars an' dollars, and all sorts of gold you never dreamt about. I wanted that dame, and you jumped in and smashed my face. It ain't that smash I'm worrying about, though I owe you for that. But you cost me that dame, an' darn near a hangin'. That's what I'm here to pay you for. An' pay you good. I'm goin' to kill you right here. Savvy? An' I guess it's a good place to get away with it right. They'll find you lying around dead, an' it'll take all the United States lawyers to guess who did it. I don't belong this location. I ain't within miles of it. Ther's no one who counts knows I'm around. I guess ther ain't a soul to disturb us. You see, your folks are up the river, an' you—I saw you come along over to this darn wreck. Do you feel like showing yourself, or will I seal up this hatch an' fire the ship?"

The man spoke very deliberately. He spoke without passion. His manner was quietly confident and satisfied.

For a moment he contemplated the raised trap as though measuring his chances of carrying out his final threat. Not for a moment did he imagine his victim would be unarmed. He remembered the Speedway. McLagan had been armed then. He had reason enough to remember something of the calibre of the weapon the man had thrust at him.

His eyes turned again to the aperture in the deck. Did he know the construction of that narrow lazaret below? It seemed doubtful. And yet it was impossible to tell.

After awhile his voice came again harshly taunting.

"You ain't makin' a lot of fuss, McLagan," he cried. "But then you ain't got a crowd around. You're on your own, and don't feel sure about things. You ken come right up if you fancy, an' I'll give it you fair. I won't send you glorywards till your face has had a peek around at the good daylight you're goin' to lose quick. If you ain't game for that I'll sure have to batten down, an' start that fire. This vessel's loaded down with an elegant cargo of good spruce an' stuff. It'll burn so ther' ain't a living soul could get near it. Then her bulkheads are steel, I guess. Gee! What a dandy oven that lazaret'll make."

Still no sound came up from below. Still the engineer gave no sign. And yet he must surely have realised the desperateness of his case.

Cy Liskard shifted his position. He was listening acutely. For all his taunting he was left guessing while his intended victim remained soundless. He was thinking very hard. He was puzzled. Suddenly he raised his gun and looked over its sight. And on the instant a shot rang out. But it came from the

lazaret and not from his weapon. A bullet struck the alleyway wall with a spat. It ricocheted off the steel, and tore screaming past the man's head. Instantly Cy's gun replied and a bullet crashed through one of the iron tanks below with a boom like a drum beat.

He waited for a return fire sheltered from the pantry doorway. But none was forthcoming. Then realisation came to him. There was no means of closing that trap while the man below still retained a single shot in his gun. At all costs he must draw his fire.

So he drew nearer. He stood in view of the trap. It was only while he fired a second shot. Then he leapt aside under cover as McLagan's answering shot rang out. It grazed his passing shoulder with a hot slither, and the blood surged to his brain. He moved a step forward and fired again into the depths. And again McLagan replied. The shot only missed Liskard by inches and the man uttered a sound like a laugh. It was the engineer's third shot, and he was more than satisfied. A few more. Only a few more.

He stood ready. He darted in and fired again through the trap. Again came McLagan's retort which took him in the cloth arm of the thick pea-jacket covering his body. He sprang clear. And suddenly a furious oath broke chokingly from his almost stifled throat. An arm had caught him from behind, encircling his bull-like neck. There was a brief struggle while he tried to turn his weapon on his unexpected assailant. Then he crashed to the deck undermost, with his gunarm held and twisted till his hand released the weapon.

Cy Liskard was standing just clear of the break of the vessel's poop. He was beside the main hatch, disarmed, defeated, but without bonds to hold his

prisoner. Immediately behind him stood Sasa Mannik who had sworn never to set foot on the wreck again. And beside him was Peter Loby, lean, grinning, but with a gun in his hand ready for immediate action. At the head of the alleyway stood Ivor McLagan still handling his automatic.

He was gazing at the gold man speculatively. Somehow there was far less resentment than repulsion in his feeling for this man from the hills, who, but for the timely arrival of Peter and his servant, would in all probability have achieved his purpose of cold-blooded murder. He was a dour, hard-looking creature whose queer eyes fascinated him. And for the moment he was wondering at the thing lying back of them.

"Well, what're you goin' to do?"

Liskard had stood the victor's scrutiny in silence as long as he could:

McLagan laughed derisively at the snarling challenge.

"Do? There's surely a lot of things I could do," he said. "I could have you pitched into that store room, or lazaret, as I heard you call it, and close it up and fire the ship. Her steel bulkheads would make it a dandy oven. Then ther's good yards to this craft, for all her canvas is mostly blown off them, and plenty of rope. Then I've still got haf a clip of cartridges in my gun and several more in my pockets. I could easy pass you on glorywards if I fancied that way. But I don't."

A sound came from the half-breed behind the prisoner. It was a native expression of complete disgust. Peter only grinned more broadly.

"Ten minutes ago I was yearning to kill as badly as you," McLagan went on calmly. "So maybe we're fifty-fifty on that. Now I'm not. While I guess you're still a hundred per cent. that way. I'm

going to turn you free to carry on your pretty work. I don't feel like spoiling it by any premature action. You see, you'll surely hang one day, and I'd rather it was done in the regular fashion of the law. You want my blood, and you haven't left me guessing why. If you were a man, and not a brute, I'd say act the sportsman and take a chance with me. I'd face you just any old way at any old time. But you prefer the advantage to be with you all the time. That's why I'm dead sure you'll hang. Now you can get out the way——"

He broke off. A great spread of sunlight had flashed down on to the deck. Cy Liskard was no longer heeding him. With the sunshine a queer look had leapt into his usually expressionless eyes which were gazing down the deck. Their stare was horrified. And something like terror had replaced their deadness. He was staring at a moving shadow. The shadow that had once sent Sasa headlong over the vessel's side, and again had driven Claire Carver into panic.

The eyes of both Sasa and Peter Loby were held by it, too. Only McLagan seemed undisturbed by that shadowy presence. He was watching the prisoner, and his gun was still ready.

"You see it, Liskard?" McLagan said, with a derisive laugh. "We've all seen it. And you wanted to add another haunting to the collection. It's a big man, eh. As big as I am. Say, we'd have made a real dandy pair of spooks, one on the deck and one in the lazaret—if you hadn't burned up the whole darn shooting match. I wonder who murdered that poor devil like you'd have murdered me. We'll never——"

A fierce oath broke from the prisoner. It was more of a cry of real terror than any expression of fury against the man taunting him. The next

moment he was speeding down the deck, running for the companion-ladder, while Peter's gun was levelled at him.

"Quit it, Peter!"

McLagan's order came on the instant and the man lowered his weapon.

"Let him go. I want him to go." Then he turned to the half-breed. "Over the side with you, boy. You don't like spooks, but you can be trusted with men. You've your gun. See to it that darn murdering swine don't touch our boats. But don't dare to kill him up."

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McLagan and Peter were leaning over the vessel's rail. Down at the steadily rising water's edge the half-breed was standing guard on the boats lying there. In the direction of the southern headland Cy Liskard was beating a hasty retreat over the rocks.

"That pretty feller's got it in for me, Peter, plumb up to the hilt of his longest and sharpest knife. I guess he's a born murderer. And to me his eyes look that way. He insulted a woman up at the Speedway, and I beat him on the face and made a bit of a mess of him. Then the Aurora boys jumped in on him, and I can guess the thing that happened. It was hard letting him make a get-away. But I just couldn't do a thing else. Besides, I've got a notion it's best. Say, boy, I owe you and Sasa more than I'm likely to be able to pay in a lifetime. How'd you manage to get around on time?"

McLagan's thanks were the deeper for the calm fashion in which they were expressed. Peter nodded and grinned.

"I'm glad we got around," he said simply. "I cursed Sasa for hauling me from my blankets last

night, but I don't now. He's queer that boy. An', gee, the pace he drove us down that creek at! You know he had a notion things were bad. First it was the darn spook on this ship which worried him. Then he passed a feller in a canoe, and he reckoned he was bad. It was that guy, and I'd say he was right. He said he was the feller he'd seen crawling around the rocks at the mouth of the Lias he told us about once. Yes. He's queer. He reckoned that feller was going down that creek for mischief, and the mischief was against you. He didn't know. He just guessed."

"Well, he guessed right, and—" McLagan laughed—"I'll have to raise his wages. He's a good boy. Say——"

He broke off thoughtfully and Peter waited. After a moment he turned from the rail.

"I got to get a stout turnscrew and some tools out of the carpenter's shop place."

"What for?"

They were moving along the deck.

"Why, I got a fool notion I'd like to climb over the stern of this kettle, and prise the letters of her name some. It's a notion."

"Why?"

McLagan shrugged.

"Just bear a hand, an' after that I've got to go right into Beacon."

"But what about our trip?"

Peter was no longer grinning. He was feeling a little impatient with this chief who could abandon their all important work for something he felt had no right to concern him at all.

"Don't worry a thing, Peter," McLagan said, recognising the change in the other's manner. "I won't let you down, boy. It's not my way. But I'm on a trail that looks kind of hot to me, and it's

pretty near to the things that really matter in a man's life. Get me, boy? No. You don't. But it don't matter. I don't ever break my word to a friend. I'm not going to let you down a thing. Our trip goes through—but later."

CHAPTER XVII

LINKS IN A CHAIN

THE full Council of the Aurora Clan was assembled. The crude accommodation was wholly inadequate. And many of the members were forced to stand through lack of sitting room amidst the *débris* of the old steam-heat cellar of the ruins of the lakeside dwelling. But then it was the full Council, and not the Supreme Executive. And its members numbered full twenty.

It was sufficiently grotesque for all the significance lying behind the gathering of these queer figures in their burlesque robes of white. They represented a deadly force in the life of this wide-flung northern country. It was the inevitable reply of those who saw and appreciated the problems and needs of their own existence, and were prepared to deal with them without reference to political visions and principles. It was reaction to pristine instinct.

Yes, it was reaction. The fact of it being a Council had no relation to democratic method. The Aurora Clan was ruled over by one individual who was called the "Chief Light of the Aurora." The Chief Light was the brain and the driving force. He was the heart, and soul, and head of the organization. His

rule was despotic. The councillors were his supporters, and the executors of his absolute will. They were possibly, even, advisers, in that they were listened to in council. But, bound under oath, they obeyed the ruling of the Chief Light without question, and under ruthless penalty.

The Aurora Clan was an expression of passionate exasperation. It was an expression of men who saw no hope in the far off councils of self-interested men, who spend their lives in talk. They wanted their own corner of the earth made safe for decent democracy, and were prepared to purge it without regard to the rest of the world's opinions. Laws might be enacted in those far off councils. They would obey them if they proved adequate in making decent life possible. If they proved otherwise, in view of the needs of their community, they would be simply set aside and other provision would be made.

To achieve its purpose the Aurora Clan viewed the situation with wide-open eyes. It saw things as they were, and refused to consider them through any medium that presented the picture in any different light. It was gazing on the rawest human nature, for all it was tricked out in the fashions of the twentieth century. It was the same human nature that had fought the old time battle in the darkest ages, unchanged in the smallest degree. So the Clan had adopted the method which has always been the ultimate control when humanity got out of hand. It was the method of earliest man. And it will be the method of the last. It was the appeal of Fear. In the opinion of the controlling mind of the Aurora Clan there was no short cut to any Utopia, or Millennium, or things of that sort. There was even no such condition to arrive at. Life was Self. Simply Self, even if, at times, thinly disguised. And Self could only be sufficiently impressed to keep it within the

bounds of reasonable decency by the methods of control which had come down throughout the ages. So the ugly banner of Terror had been raised. Awe, Superstition, Terror.

To the humorous mind the grotesqueness of the gathering must have been without question. Each pair of eyes gazing through rudely cut eye-holes in those conical hoods, if their humour were sufficient, must inevitably have smiled at the sight of the other nineteen ghostly figures squatting or standing about the place with pipes and cigars protruding through mouth-holes in the cloth of their hoods. In this respect these men-ghosts were not sacrificing their comfort for any undue regard for the impression they desired to create. They were there for business. The cellar was without comfort. They might be there for hours. Well, tobacco was no outrage of their principles.

The place reeked with every grade of tobacco smoke. Rank cigars and still ranker pipes had overridden the musty dankness of the atmosphere. Decay in any form was sufficiently abhorrent to the virile youth of this gathering. So each did his best to mask it under the fog of smoke which brought comfort to his soul.

The sitting had been a long one. All sorts of reports from individual councillors had been listened to, voted upon, and upon which the Chief Light, leaning against the central rusted furnace, had given his final decision. There was no secretary to take down any minutes of the meeting. No writing of any sort was permitted. All the business of the Council was done verbally. Sentence was passed on any delinquent reported, by the Chief Light, and the work of its execution deputed by word of mouth. None but the Chief Light knew upon whom such tasks devolved. Maybe there was recognition in the voices

as each councillor spoke, but that was all. Each member of the Council was known by a numeral which was inscribed on the white front of his gown, and, so long as he might serve on the Council, that would be the only form of identification permitted.

Towards the end of the session a stoutish councillor, with "No. 3" blazoned on the bosom of his cloak, bestirred himself. He made a sign which conveyed his claim to attention. It was given without question. The tall form of the Chief Light was instantly turned in his direction.

"'No. 3' has a report for the Council," he said, in that curious hollow tone which his masking hood gave to his voice. "We'll take his report next."

He paused for an instant while the eyes behind his mask surveyed his supporters. Then he went on in the quiet business-like fashion which marked his conduct of affairs at all times.

"There is need for explanation," he said. "'No. 3' was delegated to certain work at a meeting of the Supreme Executive which met in emergency awhile back. Many of this Council were not present at the time. You need to get it that his work was of more than usual importance to the general community. Maybe you'll all likely remember there was a tough guy called Cy Liskard who blew into the Speedway on the night of Max's celebration, and raised particular sort of hell there. 'No. 3's' report concerns this man. This man Cy Liskard is reputed to have made a big strike of gold way back on the Lias River. And, anyway, he's sold big dust at the bank and holds a credit there. It's reckoned he's hugging this strike to his bosom and we've made it our special business to see, if it's right, that the field outside his claim is made available to the folks of our city."

There was a slight but definite movement amongst the Chief Light's audience. Those who were sitting

turned in the direction of "No 3." Those who were standing gazed round on the sturdy figure expectantly.

"We'll take 'No 3's' report."

The Chief Light leant back against his furnace support prepared to listen with the rest.

"No 3" plunged at once into his story. He began formally, but quickly drifted into the vernacular common to them all.

"By the will of the Supreme Executive I set out to investigate under the orders received. Six Clansmen accompanied me. It was a darn big trip, an' we were chasing a wily guy an' a pretty bright trailman. I was lucky in having 'No 26' with me, who's wise to the country of the Lias River. Well I don't guess to worry you folks with the details of that trip. We made it all right, all right. We tracked our man right up to his home in the hills. He was there, an' we doped him an' his dogs quiet so we could work easy. And a pretty fancy hiding-hole he's got. It lies well nigh back on the Canadian Border."

"No 3" paused. And the shuffling of feet and the clearing of throats indicated the deepening interest of his audience.

"Say, it's queer," the sturdy figure went on reflectively. "He's got a claim there all right. He's got a swell sluice on a creek, and a big dump of stuff piled around it. He's got a shanty on the hillside, and corrals for his ponies. He's got a bunch of trail dogs to carry him anywhere on a winter trail. Then he's got a swell canoe, and all the gear of the goldman. But—" He broke off, and, as he gazed round on his audience, it was almost as if he were smiling behind the mask "—we couldn't see he'd washed an ounce of dust since ever he set up his sluice. I want to tell you right here, folks, if ther's a thing I'm a'mighty wise to in this darn country it's washing the yellow stuff I've been chasing twenty years. There's no

guy on the Lias River can put me wise to any notion I haven't got. Well, I tell you right now that boy hasn't washed out any gold on that claim ever since it was staked. He's set it all out. It 'ud look good to a bum tenderfoot. Maybe, even, some of you boys 'ud fall for his show down. But he can't bluff me a thing. That claim, and all his fancy gear, is a mighty big bluff. That's all. He hain't worked fi' cents of gold—there.

"But he's passed a big pouch of dust into the bank. We're wise to that. Where does he work that stuff?" The man paused again. Then a sound came from behind his mask. It was a funereal sort of laugh. "I ain't wise. But I went through with the job as it was ordered. This guy has been seen chasing around the coast at the mouth of his river. We came right down the length of that river with our eyes wide open for any blamed sign." He shook his cowed head. "He's got no workings anywhere along that river. But we found something. Oh, yes. We surely did. It's a tough coast, and hard to chase up right. There's a thousand holes an' corners for a cache an' that sort of truck. Anyway we located a sort of creek that was hidden all up. It was rocks and overgrowth so we mostly had a hell of a time making our way in. But we got through. And, cached right away up it, cached so as only chance could locate it, we hit on a swell motor boat fit to make a sea trip in tough weather. Yes, we located that, and located something else. She was in elegant shape, and we searched her clear through even to her gasoline tanks. And in one of her lockers we found two bags, canvas bags such as I knew as soon as I set eyes on 'em. They were empty. I turned 'em inside out. There was the remains of dust in 'em caught up in the seams, an' I made a collection of it. Sir," he went on, addressing himself

directly to the tall figure of the Chief Light, "that's my report, and I wait for instructions. Ther's a few bits o' details I ain't spoken on that I ken hand you when you got time to go into them. Maybe they signify some. I don't rightly know. Meanwhile that's the report I got to hand to this Council."

The Chief Light nodded.

"Good," he said. "I'll take those details later. Meanwhile you don't figger this Cy Liskard is on a strike on his claim?"

"No 3" shook his head promptly.

"I don't say all that, Chief," he said quickly. "The thing I say is the claim he's got staked around his home place is sheer bluff. Maybe he's blinding us. Maybe his claim lies elsewhere. That being so it'll likely take months locating it."

At a sign from the Chief Light full discussion on the report of "No. 3" broke out. It was dealt with exhaustively. Then the meeting passed on to such other business as claimed it.

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Alan Goodchurch was typical of officialdom but possessing a leavening of real human interest in the life of which he was in official control. In Beacon Glory his prestige stood reasonably high, but simply because of that leavening. In his official capacity as Commissioner of the district, and chief collector of revenues for the government he represented, there was no particular goodwill displayed towards him. But then Beacon Glory had no sort of use whatsoever for an authority that had its origin so far away that it required something in the nature of an astronomical telescope to discover its existence. As a man it was wholly different. He was a cheery creature outside his office, alive with kindly sympathy for the difficulties and troubles besetting his fellow-townsmen,

and really eager for the steady progress and prosperity of the heterogeneous collection of life it was his lot to endeavour to shepherd in its duty towards its government.

He was a youngish man for his post. But then it was well enough recognised that in this especial locality his was a youngish man's work. Beacon Glory needed a strong official hand and a strong official mind. And Goodchurch possessed these things arrayed in a tall muscular frame, and a large, lean face with pronouncedly square jaws.

Ivor McLagan was on reasonably intimate terms with Goodchurch. It was his business to be so. For, whatever the general attitude of the men of Beacon Glory towards their Commissioner, the oil man's business demanded official goodwill.

It was a moment in Goodchurch's official life when the human element in him was uppermost. He sat turned away from his desk, lounging in his swivel chair, talking to the engineer, and smoking a cigar, the latter a most unusual proceeding in his working hours. McLagan was overflowing a smaller bare wood chair opposite him, and he, too, was smoking one of the Commissioner's best cigars.

The strong face of Goodchurch was smiling pleasantly, and his keen grey eyes had lost their usual cold stare which had taken him years to cultivate. He shook his head.

"There's no such darn vessel registered at Boston," he said. "And there's no owner yearning to claim anything with a name like the *Limpet*. That doesn't leave me guessing. There's such a thing as insurance. In awhile, maybe, we'll be getting word from some underwriting house. Then the fur 'll fly, and someone'll be squealing in the Courts. Anyway, the position's clear. Boston's never heard of the *Limpet*, and isn't yearning to."

McLagan removed his cigar, and flicked the ash into an immaculate cuspidore. His narrow eyes surveyed the neat apartment which gave some indication of the man who presided there. It was Goodchurch's private room in the best commercial block in Beacon which was more than half given up to his staff. He knew well enough the range of this man's work. It was from the highest to the lowest in the realms of the city's discipline. And for all the man's capacity McLagan felt like smiling at the thought of the nett result of his labours.

However, his concern at the moment lay in other directions. This was his last visit to Beacon before setting out on a prolonged exploration into the hills, and he desired the Commissioner's valuable aid in a direction in which he knew he could rely on it.

He nodded.

"That's pretty clear," he said. "What next?"

Goodchurch shook his head.

"There don't seem to be much to be done—next," he said thoughtfully. "After all, what is it? A windjammer blows in on to the rocks of this abominable coast. You reckon she's mostly a cargo of lumber aboard. Well, lumber's no sort of use on this coast." He smiled. "Gold's the only thing, or oil, that's going to set our folks whooping. There don't seem to be a soul yearning to claim that craft. Even the folks who quit her." He shook his head again. "No. There's not a thing worth doing but what I've done. My report's gone in. That's usual. I guess I can send a couple of boys down to view things. But if we know anything of the seas beating on this coast-line, the storms that drove her on the rocks are liable to hammer her to matchwood in a month or so. And then there'll be nothing more."

McLagan agreed.

"It seems that way," he said, with an assumption

of indifference. "Yet I've a sublimely foolish notion there's something queer behind that wreck. And the notion's got hold of me good."

"Queer, eh?" Goodchurch's eyes narrowed, and he surveyed the cigar in his fingers reflectively. Then he chuckled quietly. "Yes," he went on. "Insurance. And that's not in my work—once my report is sent in to my chiefs."

McLagan bestirred himself. He realised the official horizon of this otherwise excellent man. He stood up.

"I told you I'd got a notion," he said simply. "Well, I got more. And I'm wondering if you'll help me out on it. I've an idea, more than an idea, a conviction, in fact, that the name of that bunch of wreckage has been changed. It was changed on purpose. Real, desperate purpose. If we can locate the owners, and anyone else interested in the *Imperial* of Bristol, we shall get back of a darn ugly story that's liable to get your department jumping on a red-hot trail. That's why I came along now. It's to give you that before I go right up into the country on a survey that's going to keep me busy till the summer's nearly through. I daresay by the time I get back the storming will have left nothing of that wreck on the rocks. It don't matter. Her story don't lie in her now. It lies in the owners and crew, who are the folks that need finding. You broadcasted before for the other name. Will you do it for this? Will you send it to the newspapers? And pass it right on to any old region that can pick it up? I'd be glad, an'—grateful."

Goodchurch laughed. He realised the oil man's earnestness, but it left him quite unaffected.

"Sure I will, Mac," he said cordially. "How did you locate the change of name? What's the story you reckon to discover?"

The other shrugged his heavy shoulders as he flung his cigar stump into the cuspidore.

"It's clear enough—with the suspicion of it in your mind. I got a close look at the painted names on the boats, and life-belts, and anything that had the ship's name on it. Mostly the change has been made good. But, like all things of that nature, it was a long job, and the folks doing it maybe got weary of it. In two cases, at least, I recognised the old name had been painted or scraped out. Some of the letters. And others substituted. I'm sure. Dead sure."

"And the story?"

McLagan shook his head and smiled.

"Murder, I'd guess—amongst other things," he said simply.

"Murder?"

Goodchurch sat up.

"Sure. And I'm looking to find who did it and why."

Goodchurch whistled.

"That sort of show gets a man."

"Ye-es."

"Anything else?"

"If I told you haf the things in my head you'd guess I was bug."

Goodchurch laughed.

"I'd need more than that to reckon Ivor McLagan that way." He stood up. "Well, I'll surely do as you ask, right away. And I guess I'll take a trip out to view that wreck myself—instead of sending any of the boys."

McLagan held out a hand which the official gripped with cordiality.

"Why, do," he said. "And make use of my shanty all you please. My boy 'll be along there if I'm away, and he'll fix you right. I'll leave word. An', say," he added with a shrewd smile as he moved towards

the door, "if you're not looking for a scare don't get aboard of that craft with the sun's shining."

"What?—Say——"

But McLagan shook his head. "I'm not going to hand you a thing else," he said laughingly. "I'm not yearning for you to get beyond the limits of your belief in my sanity. Maybe I won't see you again till I get through with my trip. So long."

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McLagan hurried down the sidewalk in the direction of the Speedway. He was thinking with a concentration that left him oblivious to his surroundings and with only his objective clear in his mind. Once he smiled to himself as the thought of Alan Goodchurch's remark about his sanity flashed intrusively upon his preoccupation. He felt sure that it was as well for his purpose that he added nothing of the thing absorbing him now to that which he had imparted to the Commissioner. No. The thing he had in his mind must remain there untold until he had completed the chain of circumstances he saw linking themselves together. Either he was stark, staring, raving mad, or——

He bumped into Victor Burns just outside the banker's office. And the collision brought him back to his surroundings and the realisation of his friend's laughing protest.

"Say, you great unmitigated boob, with your two yards of meat, ain't there room for an ounce or two like me on the same earth?"

McLagan laughed.

"Ounce or two? Say—when two folks collide on the sidewalk it mostly seems to me occasion for discussion. Who is it has right of way? The feller using the sidewalk for its original purpose, or the feller standing around with a finger calculated to set

an oil man yearning? I've got five minutes for a yarn in your office."

Burns smiled up into the twinkling eyes.

"Come right in," he said. "I've mostly got five minutes any time of day for the man who reckons to flood Beacon with oil."

They passed into the bank and to the private office. McLagan perched his great bulk on the desk, and grinned down on his still standing friend.

"Just sit around, Victor," he said, while the other waited for the purpose lying behind this sudden and unexpected visit. "I want you to talk. To yarn in your own sweet way about the darn stuff you're here to deal in. I want you to tell me all you know about the stuff. Its grades. Its colours. And the localities where the colours are found, or have been found. I want you to lay bare your golden soul to me the same as from time to time I've told you the juicy details of the stuff I spend my life chasing. Can you do it in ten minutes?"

"Not in ten weeks."

"That's tough. I've got just a haf hour."

"It was ten minutes last and five before," laughed the intrigued banker.

"Well, let's get down to bed-rock. I can set you haf a dozen questions, and we'll fix it that way."

"Have you made a 'strike'?"

McLagan laughed.

"No, siree! But *I'm* going to set the questions to this examination."

"I may sit?"

The banker's eyes were shining with the humour of the thing. But he was wondering, too. He had never known McLagan to have more than a passing interest in the trade he dealt in. And somehow he now seemed to be in deadly earnest for all his lightness.

"Sure you may," the oil man said. "And smoke, too, if you feel that way. It's good to smoke if you need to think."

Victor took his place at the desk on which McLagan was sitting and pushed a box of cigars at his guest. He sat back in his chair while the other lit up and regarded him thoughtfully.

"Well?" he demanded, with his hands clasped across his rotund body. "Get busy with those questions."

"There's more than one colour to gold?"

"Yes. Quite a number of shades in raw gold."

"Governed by the locality in which it's found?"

"Surely. The formations. Reef gold. Alluvial. The copperous qualities of quartz. The climatic conditions of the various latitudes in which it is found. A whole heap of influences affect the shades of colour."

McLagan nodded.

"Now Alaskan gold?"

"It varies the same as the rest."

"Could you tell Alaskan gold from tropical gold?"

"It depends on circumstances. Generally, yes. I've got samples here," the banker went on quickly, pulling out a draw beside him.

He lifted out a leather case and flung it open. It held a number of small glass bottles each containing a sample of yellow dust. Each bottle was carefully labelled.

"We keep these as a matter of interest. They're small samples of each different strike made in the neighbourhood with which we trade. You see? Examine them. Compare them. There's many different shades."

He sat back again while the oil man picked up each bottle in turn and compared them one with the other. And the banker found it profoundly inter-

esting to note the intensity of scrutiny to which the man whose interests had nothing to do with gold examined them.

"Do you realise the varying shades?"

McLagan was holding one bottle, searching its contents closely.

"This is pale sort of stuff," he said.

The banker looked at the label.

"Reef gold from the Ubishi Hills. It was a poor strike and petered out. Crystal quartz. And too hard to work for the ordinary goldman. It needed big capital."

McLagan nodded.

"Hardly yellow at all," he said. "Now this," he went on holding up another bottle. "This has a richer colour."

Burns agreed.

"Sure. But look where it's from. The red copperous gravel of Eighty Mile Creek. I'd say, next to some of the big Australian finds, that's one of the handsomest colours known. Here's another," he went on thrusting another bottle into his visitor's hand. "It's nigh as red. It's like as two peas with the African stuff, and some of the old Californian colour. It might even be from West Australia. But it isn't. No. It's Alaskan. And it's creek gold."

"Where from?"

"I can't rightly say—yet. Maybe we'll learn in good time. We generally do. You see, it's a sample of the stuff brought in by a boy who's working along the Lias River territory. That boy I told you of awhile back. The feller you beat over the head at the Speedway the night of its festival. Pretty stuff."

McLagan was turning the bottle in his hand. He rolled its contents over and over, intently examining its colour and the texture of its grains.

"It's cleaner than most," he said presently. "Looks like it was washed by a pretty expert hand. It's like none of the others. Not even the Eighty Mile stuff. Eighty Mile, that's on the Canadian side."

"Yes." Burns eased himself in his chair. "No. It's not like any of the other. It looks like tropical stuff. And if I didn't know better I'd surely say it was."

McLagan set the bottle down and sat gazing at it.

"What is there there? An ounce?" he asked without raising his eyes.

"Half, I'd guess."

"Can you sell me it?"

Burns chuckled.

"Why, I could, but——"

"Will you?"

McLagan was gazing squarely into the smiling round face before him. The banker's shrewd mind was thinking quickly. He shook his head.

"No," he said. "You can have that bottle a present at my expense. I'm glad when a man like you gets interested in our stuff. Some day maybe you'll quit oil for the other. But, say, won't you tell me about it? You've got me guessing."

"There just isn't a thing to tell, Victor."

"Sure?"

The banker's eyes were looking squarely into the other's.

"Not—now."

"I see."

McLagan had removed himself from the desk. He still held the bottle with its sample of gold-dust in his hand.

Victor stood up and nodded comprehensively.

"That's all right, boy," he said. "If it's any use keep that stuff. I'm shipping a mighty big dope of it away by next mail. You'd be astonished if you

knew how much. Say, how's that wreck down your way making out? The folks are all guessing about it. A lumber ship, ain't it? Any news of the owners yet?"

"Not yet," McLagan replied. "The seas'll break her to pieces in awhile. Say, Victor, I'm mighty obliged for our talk—and this." He held up the bottle and then set it in an inner pocket. Then he thrust out a hand in farewell. "Guess I won't see you for quite awhile. When I do I'll have big news concerning oil for you. Are you looking to get in?"

"Always." The banker gripped the outstretched hand.

"Right. I'll do the best I know for you when the time comes. Thanks."

McLagan passed out on to the sidewalk again. Just for a moment he stood deeply considering. Then he turned away and moved off in the direction where the best dwelling houses stood something apart from the collection of hovels which made up by far the greater proportion of the city's home residences.

CHAPTER XVIII

MCLAGAN ACHIEVES AN END

CLAIRE CARVER was alone in the sun-parlour, which was one of the many small comforts she had added to the square, frame building, which, since the bettering of her fortunes, had become her home. She was occupying a large rocker-chair, engaged upon a task hardly to be expected in a woman whose nights were spent at the gaming tables of the Speedway, and whose skill, and nerve, and capacity in holding her own against the vulture-like flotsam haunting that gambling hell, was a bye-word of the countryside.

Her busy needle was plying swiftly and skilfully upon some intimate silken garment, the contemplation of which gave her the deepest sense of womanly satisfaction. A small table was near to her hand littered with all the odds and ends which usually overflow a woman's work-basket. She was quite alone with her work and her thoughts. She was even glad that her mother was somewhere in the domestic quarters of the house engaged, as was her wont at all times, upon matters relating to creature comfort. She knew that the older woman had found solace in their new life, and she was glad. She had found

something like happiness in the care of her one remaining offspring who had become all in all to her since those days of her earlier disaster.

The afternoon was well advanced. The sun was pouring out of the western sky, moving on with that speed which ever seems to increase as the day progresses. It was hot but pleasant. The day was quite windless, and the hum of mosquitoes and flies was incessant beyond the netting covering to the range of open windows with which the place was almost completely surrounded.

After awhile the girl looked up, and her pretty blue eyes were unsmiling. The satisfaction she had in her work found no reflection in them. There was even a suggestion of unhappiness in the preoccupation of the gaze she turned upon the scene beyond the netted windows.

Perhaps she was tired. Perhaps there was weariness of mind behind her eyes. Her beauty was no less. There were no outward and visible signs of wear for all the high pressure of the artificial sort of life she lived. But the buoyancy, the intensity her wonderful eyes usually displayed under the shaded lights of the Speedway's poker room was utterly lacking now. It almost suggested that the fierce fires of the gambler spirit had already begun to burn the youth out of her.

The scene beyond the netted windows seemed to hold her. The city lay there sprawling on the lake shore. A scattering of small dwellings intervened between her and the main buildings. It was squalid. It was as ugly as only a collection of primitive human dwellings could make it. From where she sat she could see the pretentious dome of Max's Speedway, which was the medium of her fortune. She could see a flash of the sunlit waters of the lake. And then beyond, overshadowing all the puny human handi-

work, rose the dark outline of the splendid hills of her childhood.

It was the latter that held her, and in a moment the precious silken garment, upon which she had spent more dollars than a year ago she could have spent cents, was completely forgotten.

Her thought had flung back to another life and its people; folk who, unlike herself, lived in the open and the daylight. She was thinking of the rugged coast with its fiercely alluring bays, its inlets, and its upstanding headlands. She was thinking of the rough, strong man who lived in a home like an eagle's eyrie so that he could gaze upon God's good world, and revel in those fierce, bracing elements which so appealed to and matched his own nature. She remembered that last recent meeting with him on the deck of the wreck in the bay from which she had fled in utter and complete panic.

It was a moment not easily forgotten. She still shrank from contemplating her own display of weakness, but it robbed her of not one moment's delight in the memory of the quiet nerve and calm resolution with which Ivor McLagan had reassured and comforted her. Then she remembered the time when he had deliberately picked her up in his arms and helped her over the vessel's side. He had done it without a second thought, and as though he had been dealing with some terrified child. And then she remembered his plain face as it had smiled back into hers over the side of the vessel as returning courage had once more restored her confidence.

He was quite plain and generally unsmiling for all a certain humour she sometimes saw lying behind his eyes. Then he was so harshly rough—at times. It was not always so. And it was mostly manner. Oh, she knew that. And she smiled softly to herself as she thought of the fashion in which he had sought to

drive her from the deck of that vessel. She sighed. She liked him. She liked and trusted him. Nobody could help liking him, she told herself. He was so transparently honest and—and simple. Then she smiled again, almost tenderly, as she reviewed those scenes in which he and she had been the only actors. How many were they? How many times had he asked her to——?

Her eyes sobered and her thought passed swiftly to another man. It was the dark Italian face of Max Lepende that shut out her vision of the other. The thing she feared, the thing she had even discussed with Ivor, was impending. Her woman's instinct was deeply perturbed as she thought of a little scene that had occurred just as she was leaving the Speedway the night before. Max had approached her as her game broke up. She had had an especial run of good luck. He came to her smiling, elaborate, and impressive in his manner. He had asked her permission to ride with her in her automobile to her home. There was a bunch of "toughs" around, he told her. He had had word of a possible "hold-up." She must bank with him for the night, and he begged her to accept his escort. Then had come the demonstration of the man's purpose. In the automobile he had produced a jewelled pendant of great value. He had craved her acceptance of it with all the display which his extravagant manner made so sickening to her. He had almost forced it upon her. But she had refused, definitely, even coldly, and she had witnessed the instant effect of her refusal upon him.

The girl was more of a psychologist than perhaps she knew. She had certainly learned to know something of the man who ruled over the destinies of the Speedway. She had watched Max as he returned the pendant to its case. Driving the automobile, with her eyes on the disreputable road, she had still

been aware of the sudden cold, hard light that had replaced the smile in the man's dark eyes, and noted the almost vicious snap with which he closed the case over the glittering jewels he had offered her. And in that moment she had remembered her talk with Ivor on the subject of this man, and was glad of it. It was good to think of Ivor McLagan, with his plain strong face, at such a moment. And the more so when the car had stopped at her home, and Max had alighted and was taking his leave of her. What were his parting words? Oh, she remembered them. They were not easily forgotten, and as much for their tone as their text. He had spoken with the same old smile she knew by heart, and which she knew to be as meaningless as all the rest of his artificialities.

"I guess the 'hold-up didn't mature," he had said. "I sort of felt it wouldn't, Claire, with me around. You see, the folks of this city mostly have more sense than to get across me. The toughest of them wouldn't take a chance that way. And they're surely wise. I'm feeling sore, my dear, you couldn't feel like handling that toy I was hoping to pass you. Think it over. Don't leave it the way it is. Get a sleep on it and maybe, like that 'hold-up,' you'll think better of it."

It was a threat and the girl knew it. It was that moment which she had long since contemplated when she must choose between this smooth, unscrupulous creature who had built his fortune upon the human weaknesses of those about him, and abandoning the precincts of the place which had represented salvation to her in her darkest moments. Ivor was right. "You're going to get it if you keep on——" She remembered his words. They were right. She had known it at the time he had uttered them. And, somehow she was glad, and it comforted her, that it

was he who had uttered them, and begged her to quit the game at the Speedway. Well——

She turned her head sharply. She heard voices talking beyond the parlour doorway. They were her mother's and another which she recognised instantly. It was the voice of the man of whom she was thinking. In a moment she had bundled the silken garment in her lap out of sight.

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There was no sign to indicate Claire's mood of the moment before. She was smiling up into McLagan's face, and the man was telling her without subterfuge the object of his visit.

"You see, Claire," he said, "I had to come along for two reasons. One is I'm going right up into the hills for a month or so, and won't be along back in Beacon till summer's nigh through, and so I won't see you in quite awhile. And the other is——" He laughed in his short unmirthful fashion. "—why, something else."

The mother had left him to make his way to the sun-parlour while she returned to her interrupted labours. She was glad enough to do so. There never was a moment in her simple life that she was completely without hope of this man as a son-in-law.

McLagan had sprawled his great body into a protesting cane rocker. The table, with its feminine litter, intervened between him and the woman who was the most precious thing in all the world to him.

"Seeing there's two reasons I guess that's so," Claire said slyly. Then her smile lit anew. "But I'm real glad you came along now, Ivor. I'd just have hated you going along up to the hills and being away all that time without seeing me first." Then she laughed outright. "Say, what'll your tame spook be doing with you away?"

The man shook his head.

"I don't rightly know," he said seriously. "Maybe the sea'll swallow him up. And I'd say it would be good that way." Then a deep light grew in his eyes. "But it's real kind of you saying that, Claire. I just had to come along anyway."

The girl wanted to ask him why. There was an impulse, a quick, hot impulse to challenge him, and somehow it was an impulse which only a brief while ago would never have been stirring. But she refrained. Instead she turned her eyes to the wide-open windows, and gazed away at the hills of her childhood.

"You see I've got things to tell you—before I go. And they're important." McLagan went on quietly.

The girl's gaze remained upon the hills so full of memory for her. But suddenly her pulses had started to hammer in a fashion so unruly that she was horrified lest the man might be aware of it.

"You mean about that—wreck?"

"Yes. About that—wreck."

Claire sighed. Her pulses had suddenly sobered. But the calm that replaced her moment of emotion had no satisfaction in it. Now her gaze came back to the man's face. And the wide blue eyes were striving for a smile of interest she did not feel.

"Yes, tell me," she said, with a pretence of eagerness. "It was all very mystifying and horrible. I haven't forgotten. I'd say it isn't easy to forget that sort of thing. My, I was scared."

McLagan began to grope in his pockets.

"May I smoke?" He was holding up his cigar case.

"Surely." The girl laughed. "Isn't it queer? You haven't always asked that."

"No." The man smiled back. He glanced about

the handsome loggia with its pretty comforts. "It's queer the way we change with circumstances."

"Yes. Smoke up. I like the rougher things best. Maybe I didn't always feel that way. I've seen so much of the smooth and shining since I came to Max's Speedway that I kind of like to think of the rough granite I used to know back there in the hills."

McLagan glanced out of the window as he lit his long, lean cigar.

"Yes," he said. "It's stood up to things since the world began. Say, kid, I want you to hand me anything you can about—Jim. I mean, I know the story you and your Mum handed me at the time. I know all that, but—— Say, he'd made a real big strike in Australia, and was on his way back to home. Was he bringing his stuff along? Or was it banked? What were the plans he'd made? I sort of remember a long letter he'd sent. Did he hand you your Mum details?"

Claire was startled. She sat up in her rocker and one beautifully shaped hand was raised and passed across her smooth brow. Then it rested for a moment upon her wealth of ruddy hair.

"We—we don't know a thing, Ivor," she said, in a low voice, as she gazed earnestly into his face. "Not a thing but what you've heard from us. He'd made a strike. I—I believe it was a wonderful strike. His letter conveyed that. And he was on his way home on the *Imperial* with the result of it. But whether in dust or a bank credit I can't even guess. Then the ship sank, and he was drowned——"

McLagan shook his head.

"Not drowned," he said.

For some moments there followed complete silence.

"But the ship sank. They picked up the S.O.S.

She's never been heard of since. It was in mid-ocean. And Jim—Jim has never been heard of again."

The girl's protest came with passionate intensity.

"The ship didn't sink. And Jim wasn't—drowned."

McLagan spoke in that queer rough fashion he never failed to use in moments of deep conviction.

Claire stared at him with questioning eyes. A surge of emotion was driving through her. There was such conviction in the man's tone and manner. Jim was not drowned. The *Imperial* did not sink. Suddenly she leant forward.

"What do you mean, Ivor," she urged in a tone almost as rough as his. "Tell me. Tell me quick. I must know. Jim's alive. The *Imperial*——"

McLagan shook his head.

"I don't think he's alive. And the ship——"

"You mean he's dead—killed—maybe——"

"Murdered for his stuff."

Again there fell a silence and the man watched the face of the girl through the smoke of his cigar. Her breath was coming quickly, and she was struggling for composure. At last she steadied herself.

"Ivor, tell me. Oh, tell me all you know. Don't keep me in suspense. I know. I see. It's—it's something to do with that wreck, and—and the shadow——" She flung out one delicate finger pointing. "That figure. It—it—was—Jim's—shadow. Oh."

The girl's intuition had leapt. There was excitement, passion, horror in that final ejaculation and the man saw that it was no moment for delay. There was a dreadful look in the beautiful eyes that were gazing wildly into his. He removed his cigar.

"Get a grip on yourself, little girl," he said quickly, and in that tone of gentleness he only rarely used. "I'll tell you what I know. It's not a deal. But

it's enough to say—to my mind—that Jim was murdered. The wreck down on my coast is your Jim's ship. That I know beyond doubt. And that shadow—I don't know how it comes there, I don't know the meaning of ghostly shadows, but I guess I've convinced myself I've recognised in that shadow a crazy sort of outline of your Jim. Jim was a mighty big man, and he had a walk I'd recognise dead easy. Do you remember, kid, that ghost, or whatever it was, was moving. It was a queer figure of a man walking—towards us. Do you remember? But of course you do. Do you know I sort of recognised Jim's walk in that thing's movements?" He shook his head with a puzzled, far-off look in his eyes. "Guess, maybe, it's fancy. Maybe I'm all wrong. But anyway the notion's back of my head. Jim died right there on that deck. He was killed—murdered—*while he was walking aft.*"

He went on at once as the girl remained silent.

"Who killed him? And why?" He shrugged his shoulders. "That's the thing I'm going to find out. Where's the skipper and crew of that ship? They quit her in fair weather. Why? Who changed her name? Why? Why kill your brother? For his wad? Sure. Not for any bank credit. Where's his partner, that boy Len Stern? He's not showed up."

Claire was listening to his every word with close attention. Such was her intensity that her lips moved as though she were repeating to herself the things he said. The instant he ceased speaking, sharp and passionately came her challenge.

"You've more than that to tell, Ivor," she cried. "Tell it me. You must. Oh, you don't know all this means to me. You don't know the ugly thing you've raised up in me. Ivor—Ivor—I think I could kill the man who murdered our Jim with my

own two hands. He was my brother. He hadn't a thought but for us. There's not a thing in all the world I wouldn't do to—to hand those folks who murdered him the justice they need. It just frightens me the way I feel. Tell me."

"There isn't a thing more to tell now, Claire. There surely isn't. I don't know a thing yet but what I've told you. But I mean to know."

"And then you'll come to me—and tell me?"

McLagan shook his head.

"There'll be no need." The man sat forward in his chair, and reaching out one hand it closed over the slim hand of the girl, which, in her urgent emotion, had been laid upon her work table. His whole manner had softened from his threat against those he was seeking. And, listening to him, the girl grew calm under the influence of his gentle tone of supreme confidence. "Say, Claire, I've asked for the right to fix things for you. I've asked, and you've always refused. Well, I'm asking nothing now. I'm just telling you. Jim was your brother. Well, I'm just taking to myself the right to get after the folks who've killed him. You can't stop me. No one can. And when I've located 'em, when I've got 'em where I need 'em, they'll be dealt with, sure as God, in the fashion they deserve. It's my right which you can't deny me. Jim was a friend of mine, and I love his sister better than life. No," he went on, in the same gentle tone, as the girl released her hand from his. "I'm making no break. I'm not asking a thing. I'm just telling you the straight fact, and assuring you of the thing my mind's fixed on. Maybe I've made you angry. I can't help it. I don't want to. There's not a thing farther from my mind. I want you to get the fact I'm claiming a right, the world and you can't deny me. Now I want you to try and forget all about it."

"How can I forget it all?"

The girl shook her head. The trouble in her eyes was almost painful. But through it all there was something gazing out upon this big plain creature which anybody but he must have interpreted without a second thought.

"To you Jim has been dead nearly a year," McLagan said. "It's just as it was. Only the circumstances are different—now."

"I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean?"

The man was startled. In an instant a flush dyed his weather-stained cheek. Then it paled abruptly. He turned and flung his cigar at an open window. It hit the netting and fell on the floor. He sprang up and collected it again, and turned to the girl sitting with her face turned away so that he only beheld the charm of its profile.

"Claire?"

"Yes, Ivor."

"Would it worry you if I made another bad break?"

The girl shook her head.

"I don't think so, Ivor."

The man smoothed back his unruly hair.

"Here, I want to get it clear. There's just one sort of break I feel like making."

His tone was rough and contained nothing of his real feelings.

The girl inclined her head and her eyes came frankly to his face. She read the doubt there. She read a whole lot more.

"I only seem to remember one sort of break," she said, with the dawn of a smile that was irresistible.

"Thank God!"

In a moment all doubt had passed out of the man's eyes. He was smiling with all the transparent happi-

ness of a schoolboy. He came over to the girl's chair, and, reaching down, took possession of both her yielding hands. She stood up tall, and slight, and infinitely beautiful in her pretty afternoon frock.

"Now the right is doubly mine, little girl," he said. "And by God! there's no one on this darn old earth going to rob me of it. Mine, eh? Mine at last." And caught her up in his arms.

CHAPTER XIX

MCLAGAN RETURNS FROM THE HILLS

MCLAGAN surveyed the litter strewn about the beach. It was a queer collection. There were two upturned boats with their white seams smeared and daubed heavily with tar. They were hardly recognisable as the well-painted lifeboats that had once stood on the boat deck of the wreck lying on the far shore of the bay. A wealth of ship's ropes sprawled upon the shingle. Ropes collected as a result of sheer covetousness rather than from a point of view of utility. Many of them were great hawsers and of no use whatsoever in the sort of sailing that Sasa Mannik undertook. Then there were heavy cable chains, and ship's buckets. There was a great store of tumbled ship's canvas. There were pots and pans, and tools of every description. There was an array of lumber too, and blankets, and plates, and knives and forks, and dishes. It was an amazing collection of sheer loot which only the undisciplined mind of the half-breed could have prompted. And it had been amassed in the two months and more that McLagan had been away on his trip up into the hills.

For some moments the whiteman regarded the collection with frowning eyes. Then his gaze came

back to the sturdy figure of his servant whose dark features were screwed up into that which the other interpreted as a grin of sublime predatory satisfaction. His own eyes were deadly serious for all the smile lurking behind them.

"Sasa," he said quietly, "you always were a rogue, and a thief, and a liar, but I never guessed you were a bigger rogue than coward. The temptation of all this loot was too much even for your scare, eh? You've been aboard that wreck, and you've looted it from end to end. I guess I ought to beat you. I surely ought. But I'm not going to. No. It kind of seems to me your low-down thieving nature's knocked something that's even worse out of you—your rotten scare of that ship. And that's surely to the good. For me you can keep your junk. But I don't know what'll happen when the big Commissioner knows the thief you are. Maybe he'll have you hanged by your neck. You helped save my life when that guy wanted it bad. But I don't see how I'm going to butt in when the big Commissioner gets busy on you."

The half-breed was quite undisturbed by the threat. The creases on his ugly face only deepened and he shook his head.

"The big man, Commissioner, not say nothing, boss," he said. "He come by ship. I tak him by 'em. Oh, yes. An' I say him: 'Dis junk. It not nothing bimeby. The sea all have 'em. Why not Sasa have 'em?' An' him big man say: 'Sasa have him all much plenty what he darn please.' So I tak 'em all dis thing much. An bimeby plenty much more. Maybe bimeby I mak 'em good trade. Oh, yes."

"I see. Boss Goodchurch has been around?"

"Sure, boss. He come with him mans two. Him look an' look. Him see all thing plenty, but not the

devil spirit. Oh, no." The man's eyes widened at the mere memory of the terrible shadow he still feared so dreadfully. "Him no sun when big man come. Him not see. No. Then Sasa think big much. Sasa say: 'No sun, no devil spirit.' It good. Sasa go by ship when no sun. He wait. The sun him go down in sea. It good. Bimeby Sasa get all thing that way. Yes."

McLagan laughed, and the half-breed grinned back at him.

"You're all sorts of a scoundrel, anyway, Sasa."

"Sasa much wise man."

The man's final retort was quite unanswerable, and the whiteman left it at that.

He glanced out over the grey, cold-looking waters. The whole bay was more than usually desolate and bleak now that the height of summer had spent itself. The fall lay ahead. It was already in the atmosphere. That swiftly passing fall, when days shorten mercilessly and the nights grow in length with the coming of the fierce season when the interminable northern night makes life a burden hard to bear. His absence of ten weeks was a slice out of the northern summer that left little enough of a season in which the heart of man can rejoice.

He had completed his work, that urgent work which meant so much to his Corporation, and to himself, and those who shared in his labours. But he knew that the importance of it by no means ended there. In the end it would mean the complete establishment of the whole region, and the well-being of those adventurers who had made it their hunting ground. It had been ten weeks of enthralling labour crowned by a success of which even he had hardly dared to dream. All he had suspected, hoped for, all the astute Peter Loby had assured him of, had been proved beyond any element of doubt. The

greatest coal and oil belt the world had ever known had been definitely discovered.

It ran right back from within sixty miles of the coast sheer through the hill country across into Canadian territory. And beyond that it was almost impossible to say how much it occupied of that chaotic region. The work had been hard. There had been times when breaking trail by river and portage through well-nigh unexplored regions was almost fierce. But nothing had deterred, nothing had deflected his purpose. His investigation had been as complete as the time permitted. And now he had returned to his home on the bay with a rough draft map sufficiently detailed for the purposes of obtaining at Washington and Ottawa the coveted concessions.

But his return had been an even greater triumph than that. After all the work of survey had been something prospective. It was a wide searching forward for the future. It was something appealing to his engineering mind, and would doubtless appeal to the men of finance supporting him. But it would mean infinitely less to those folk in Beacon who were yearning for the immediate. The appeal of the immediate was awaiting his return to camp.

The great news reached him on the river fully three days east of his oil camp. It came by a special river man who had been despatched to locate his outfit. The man had been sent with an urgent recall. For the lesser men in the camp, in the absence of their chiefs, found themselves incapable of dealing with the amazing situation that had arisen. A gusher had broken out at "No. 8" drill. It was a tremendous gusher at a drilling that had given no sign of the oil they were about to strike. It had come in a flood that looked like thousands of barrels a day, a stream for which their preparations were wholly inadequate. So the urgency of the despatch.

That was more than a week ago now. They had speeded home in a delirium of anticipation. And even their anticipation failed to approach the reality. The thing was infinitely greater than the fancy of the messenger had painted it, and the difficulties of its control were immense. But their presence was a tremendous spur, and the genius of Loby did the rest. At length order was achieved out of chaos, and all chance of permanent disaster was averted.

Now McLagan was on his way to Beacon with his amazing news. All sorts of urgent work lay before him. But of one thing he was fully determined. Whoever else must wait Claire should be the first person to learn of the triumph in which his work of this drab grey coast was about to terminate.

His mood was a happy one in which to greet the henchman who served him so faithfully. Little wonder then there was a smile behind the eyes witnessing the half-breed's demonstration of human cupidity. Even he found it difficult to administer the necessary chiding. In a few hours time he would be in Beacon with his sensational news that would send the stocks of his Corporation soaring sky high. He would be gazing into wonderful eyes which had been one long tantalizing dream to him during the weeks of his labours. He would be holding Claire's fair slim body in a tight embrace, and telling her of the great things Fortune had cast for them. It was all so very, very good to contemplate.

It was really all too good to permit of the obtrusion of lesser things. But McLagan refused to yield to his natural excitement. There were other things which must not be ignored. And the sense of their importance was the more deeply impressed upon him as he contemplated Sasa Mannik with his collection on the beach, and the desperate shape which

had befallen the pitiful wreck lying at the far side of the bay.

Even from the distance the inroads of the storming tides were discernible. The battering of the vessel's hull was pathetic. There were added gashes in the poor thing's sides where her lumber cargo somehow contrived to protrude. There was no longer a stitch of canvas upon her yards to scare the sea fowl with its whipping in the chill wintry breeze blowing in off the ocean. Whether or not this was due to Sasa's depredations it was impossible to tell. It might be. All her gear was limply adrift, and her yards were lying sadly. She was leaning at a perilous angle, and the tides had driven her farther up on to the rocks. One real great storm and anything might happen to her.

McLagan turned again to his henchman.

"Well? What you been doing besides loading down the beach with all this junk?"

"I fish by the Lias."

The half-breed had lowered his tone significantly. And McLagan sought to penetrate the close mask of immobility which seemed to have settled upon the man's features.

The whiteman permitted a shadowy smile.

"Did you make a swell catch?"

"Maybe, yes. Maybe, no." Sasa shrugged. "I mak big look for the man who mak shoot you all up. I think big. Plenty big. I say, this man. Maybe I find him. Yes. Boss all say plenty Sasa big coward. Him frightened of fool jack-rabbit. I mak find this man. Then I show him. I kill him all up dead."

McLagan laughed.

"But you didn't find him," he said silyly.

Sasa shook his black head.

"No," he said simply. "So he live. But I find some thing. Yes. I mak find cave. Oh, yes. It

camp for man. I know him. It all mak clean not so as an Eskimo camp."

He chuckled quietly. "Him all swep clean. So. An' so." He took his cap from his mane of hair and a sweeping gesture illustrated his words. "Maybe him camp this man. Oh, yes." He returned his headgear to its place. "I watch him. Long time. Yes. No. He not come. An' bimeby I go. Yes."

"That was the 'some thing'?"

"Sure. An'—another some thing."

"Ah." McLagan's tone was interested but he glanced away seawards. Then, quite abruptly, he indicated the house on the cliff. "We'll get right back to home," he said. "You can hand me your yarn as we go. You'll have to get food right away. I'm beating into Beacon as soon as I've eaten. You'll need to stop around this bay till I'm through an' get back. Guess, since the Commissioner doesn't kick, you can go right on collecting your junk till the beach is like a ship's store. I don't care a curse what you do so you don't quit it. See? The fish can wait."

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McLagan's journey into Beacon was made at his usual reckless speed. But unlike his usual habit he did not drive straight to the Plaza Hotel. It might have been expected that bearing such news as he was conveying to the city he would have sought out the one place whence its circulation would have been the most rapid. Then there was Claire. A wild desire was urging him to go straight to the square frame-built home that had now become almost the whole focus of his life. But he resisted it. For once in his life he entered the city almost secretly. His speed had been furious, and his ponies were well nigh tuckered out, as, in the wintry cool of the

evening, he drew up outside a remote livery barn that stood on the farthest outskirts of the city.

The man's plans were clearly designed. There was no hesitation. There was no deviation from the line he had marked out for himself. It was dark when he turned his spent team over to the proprietor of the barn. He gave strict and minute instructions for the care of the weary beasts. Then he set out on foot, and the darkness swallowed him up.

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It would have been difficult to associate shadows with Claire's smiling blue eyes, raised as they were so happily to the rugged race of Ivor McLagan. His embrace showed no signs of yielding. It was an embrace that expressed all the pent feeling of those weeks of absence which haunting memory had so desperately prolonged. Yet only a moment before his coming a deep depression had reigned where now only there were happy smiles. So it had been for much of the time of his absence.

The girl gently withdrew herself from his arms. It was as though the riot of her own feelings was such as to demand restraint. She laughed happily. And she strove to hold a torrent of questions in check.

"Why, Ivor," she cried almost reproachfully, "I hadn't a notion you were within miles of the city. When I heard your dear old voice laughing and jollying Mum in the hall-way, I could have shouted for joy. I surely could. When did you get through? When did you get in?"

She moved to a big rocker chair and pulled it forward. She led him towards it, and McLagan dropped his big body into it with a content that was shining in every line of his plain face. Then she drew up her own chair near to him.

"Why, last evening."

"Last evening?"

McLagan nodded, and his smile deepened at the girl's tone of reproach. He spread out his hands in a gesture that was meant to disarm.

"It had to be that way, kid," he said. "It just had to be. I could have beat it right along to here. But if I had I'd never have quit to fix all the stuff that helped to bring me along back here to you. Say, I hadn't a minute till now that I haven't been on the dead run. And when I've told you you'll be glad. I wasn't getting around here till I could sit and bask right along in the only smile that makes a feller's life worth while."

He eased himself in his chair. Then he reached out and possessed himself of the arm of the girl's chair. His hand closed over it, and, with consummate ease, he drew it up to his. They were facing each other, and so close that the polished arms of the chairs touched side by side. He glanced quickly round the sun-parlour. The door into the hall-way had been discreetly closed by the mother, whose fondest hopes had at last been realised. She had beaten a retreat to the domestic quarters which conveniently claimed her.

The place still contrived to trap all the sunlight of the late summer day. The full heat of the season had long since passed. The wide open windows were no longer netted. For the not infrequent night frosts had done much to banish the torment of flies and mosquitoes.

Claire's reproach had vanished. She was content.

"Tell me," she said eagerly. "I'm just crazy for all that's—happened. It's been so long, Ivor." She laughed a little self-consciously. "Oh dear, you know I just hated the weeks till they'd passed."

"They didn't worry you worse than me," the man returned. "And yet I don't know. Maybe they

did. You see, you hadn't the thing I had to—Say, kid." He sat up in his chair. He leant forward. Reaching out, he took possession of the slim hands lying in her lap, those hands he had so often marvelled over in their deft manipulation of the cards in the Speedway's poker room. "I've hit the biggest thing this world can show a feller in the work that's mine. Gee," he breathed deeply, while his eyes narrowed as they gazed into the eager face before him, "I'm through with it all. I'm through—almost—with Beacon. We're going to get right out. You, and me, and your Mum. We're going where we can live in sunshine all the year round. Where there's no skitters and blizzards, and no muck. Do you get me, little girl? It's right up to you to hand the word. We're going to get married, you and me, just as soon as you say it. And for the sake of all that's merciful let it be before the winter closes down."

Claire laughed happily.

"I guess you've fallen plumb off the main trail," she cried delightedly. "You—you—great big, queer old thing. Now you sit right back in that chair. My hands are good an' comfortable in my lap. You've got to sit around the same as if I was your most important director, and, as my official mining engineer, hand me your report so I can pass it on to the shareholders, and keep them good-tempered. Now begin."

McLagan laughed. It was the laugh of a man whose delight was sheer obedience to a woman's will. He obeyed her literally. He released her hands reluctantly enough and sat back. Then his smile faded out, and Claire fancied she detected weariness in his serious eyes.

"It's easy making that report to you. You won't need the maps and those figures a real director

needs. Here it is, kid. We've hit a belt of territory with a world's coal and oil supply in it. We're in first, and we'll have the concession before a news-sheet can grab a detail. That's that. Coal? There's hundreds of miles of mountains of it within a hundred miles of the coast. Say, in two years time there'll be a railroad from here to our territory, and from here to the coast where the mail boat only stands off at present. In a few years there'll be a city twice Beacon's size right down there on the coast where now there's only a fool sort of landing and a bunch of longshore guys. But that isn't all, kid. No. That's all to come. The real thing, the big thing that'll set Beacon whooping crazy is right there at our borings. No. 8 sprang a gusher on us. They're capturing thousands of barrels of the stuff. It's the biggest oil flood I've seen in fifteen years of a life mused up in oil. Do you get it?"

The girl nodded. A light of real excitement was shining in her eyes and her oval cheeks were flushed to something of the hue of her beautiful hair. She breathed deeply.

"Yes. I think I understand. Surely I do," she cried, and her hands clasped each other tightly. "It's the big thing of your life, Ivor. It's your triumph. It's all you've been patiently working for. I know. We've often talked of it. Work. Always work. Disappointment. Always disappointment. And then—oh, yes. I know. And Beacon. That city that's always been in your mind. That 'muck-hole' as you've always called it. In one bound you—you will have lifted it right up to a swell prosperity where there won't be any need for the conditions you've always hated to see lying around. It's your complete triumph. Your big thing."

"It should be." The man laughed without mirth.

"Should be? It is."

The girl's enthusiasm was met with a shake of the head.

"I thought that way, little girl. I guess the notion set me nigh crazy. The sort of junk I handed up to the gods of fortune would have set you laffing if you'd seen into my head when I knew about the thing we'd hit. That was at first. Then I came along down to home, and stood up on that hill and took a peek below. There was the wreck. It's the wreck of the ship that was bringing your Jim home. And then I guess the gods of fortune must have got worried. I hadn't a notion of handing 'em up any more junk. The whole thing left me cold. I told myself right there ther's bigger things in life than simple success. Much bigger. And amongst 'em, and maybe biggest of 'em all is the woman who reckons to move along down the trail of life with you, and all the things that go to make up her life. Her sufferings are yours, her joys and sorrows, and—and—No, little kid, the sight of that wreck got me right away. And I knew that the other didn't matter. I wasn't through with my work. I'd still got it to do. And so I came along. And that's why I didn't get around, for all I was crazy to, until now."

The girl's eyes had grown very tender as she listened to the queer rough tones of this man as he unconsciously laid bare his soul to her. There was no smiling response. Only a nod. But it told McLagan all he wanted to know. She, too, was caught again in the terrible tragedy that had robbed her of a brother.

"You're the first to hear these things," he went on quietly. "Not a soul else in Beacon knows a thing. Not even Victor, at the Bank. No. I kept it for you. And you're going to keep it close till I say. I've been on the dead run. I've been so

busy—But there, little girl, there's things I can tell you, and things I can't. Maybe there's some things you'll never know. It don't matter. The thing I want to hand you right away is we've had word from Len Stern. Goodchurch sent out word about that ship. He asked about it. And the authority told him she was supposed lost in mid-ocean. That was that. We knew. We'd got that. But we were playing big. I guessed our only chance of things was a hope of the message getting to Len Stern, if he was alive. It did. The news-sheets took up our inquiry, and it found him in Perth, Western Australia. He cabled Goodchurch he was sailing just after I'd set out for the hills. Two weeks back Goodchurch got word from Seattle. The boy would be along up right away. We figure he'll be at the coast to-morrow, and I'm going right down to meet him. I want his story bad. I want it. And when I got that maybe——”

He broke off, and a deep, almost savagely brooding light was shining in his contemplative eyes as he surveyed the table that still contained the litter of the needlework with which Claire passed so much of her leisure.

“Won't you tell me, Ivor? Can't you?” The girl had reached out, and, for a moment, one of her hands rested on his, supported on the arm of his chair.

McLagan shook his head and the girl's hand was withdrawn.

“Leave all this to me, Claire,” he said with something of his old brusqueness. “I'm right or I'm wrong. If I'm right——”

Again he broke off. And Claire saw the muscles of his clean-shaven jaws constrict. Somehow the sight left her with no desire to press him further.

“No, my dear,” he went on, with added gentleness.

"You carry right on. This thing'll be through in a few weeks now, one way or the other. All my own work is fixed. When the other's cleared up then ther's only to close up my shanty at the coast, and come right along in to wait for my folks—my directors. After that we'll beat it from Beacon. And my work at Washington and Ottawa 'll help to hand us quite a swell honeymoon. Does that fix you? Will you——?"

The girl nodded. And the man leant back again with an air of great content.

"That's fixed sure," he said. "You'll just carry right on at your beloved Speedway."

The girl shook her head.

"The time's come for me to quit," she said quietly.

Claire was smiling. But somehow her smile was unconvincing. McLagan was sitting bolt upright. His eyes had suddenly narrowed.

"Why?"

It was a throw-back to all that was roughest in him. Again the girl shook her head.

"Why?"

The man's tone was unchanged. It was compelling. For another moment Claire hesitated. She remembered the fashion in which he had hurled himself to her defence before, and the thought of the thing he might do caused her hesitation. It was the simple truth, or complete denial. The latter was impossible. She laughed a little mirthlessly.

"It's the thing we once talked of," she said.

"You mean—Max?"

Claire nodded.

"What is it? Tell me."

"It was the night before—before I saw you last."

McLagan nodded. His eyes were almost savage.

"He told me there was word of a 'hold-up' for my automobile. He offered to accompany me. He

assured me no 'hold-up' would happen with him there. It didn't. In the automobile he offered me jewellery. I refused it. Then he said something. Do you want what he said?"

"Every word." There was a grim clipping to the man's words.

Accustomed as Claire was to fend for herself; accustomed as she was to think and act without reference to anything but her own judgment and inclination, there was something that excited and thrilled her in the simple act of yielding to this man's will. It was something so new. Something which, for all her independence, appealed to the woman in her. He was so strong. He was so ruthlessly rough. But for all her delight in him a queer apprehension lay back in her mind.

"It was when he left me at the door, here," she said slowly. "What was it? Yes. I remember." She laughed. "It isn't easy to forget 'I guess the 'hold-up' didn't mature. I sort of felt it wouldn't, Claire, with me around. You see, the folk of this city have more sense than to get across me. The toughest of them wouldn't take a chance that way. And they're surely wise. I'm feeling sore, my dear, you couldn't feel like handling that toy I was hoping to pass you. Think it over. Don't leave it the way it is. Get a sleep on it, and maybe, like the 'hold-up,' you'll think better of it.'"

"It was a threat."

The set of the man's face was a match for his tone. There was anger, hot anger in the eyes which Nature had designed so admirably for frowning. The girl nodded.

"Oh, yes. And I remembered our talk. And I knew it was quitting time. I thought and thought. Oh, I thought so hard. I didn't want to quit. I wanted to—to fight it out. You know, Ivor, I'm

foolish that way. I'd got all the money I needed, but it was the thought of quitting because of—because I'm a woman and he's a man. I didn't quit. No. I went on. But I refused his jewellery. I refused his every advance. And then I realised. Things seemed to change somehow, I can't tell you how. The rest of the women acted differently. The servants in the place. Oh, the boys didn't. And then one day Jubilee forgot to say fool stuff. He didn't say much, but it was characteristic. He said: 'The Queen is dead. Long live the Republic.' I turned on him at once. I said: 'You mean she's deposed.' His face was dead serious for once. He said: 'Same thing or worse. They've a way of beheading deposed monarchs.' Then his queer eyes followed Max as he moved about the dance room for awhile, and then he looked round on me. He said: 'Say, Claire, why not quit with the boodle. It makes a revolution sick to death when anyone gets away with the stuff they reckon to handle for themselves.' I guess I managed to laugh, but there wasn't a laugh back of my mind. I thought of you, Ivor. Two days later I got a queer note. Here it is. You can read it."

She took a folded paper from the bosom of her frock and passed it to the man whose curious silence and seeming rigidity while she told her story set a feeling of apprehension stirring in the girl. McLagan took the paper and unfolded it. And his unsmiling eyes perused its contents.

"You don't need to worry. The Light of the Aurora is shining. And by its light all things are seen, all things are known."

For The Chief Light of the Aurora,

A LESSER LIGHT.

McLagan passed back the paper without a sign, without a word. And the girl went on.

"You know that note's given me a notion, Ivor. Oh, I haven't worried since I got that. And not a thing has happened. I haven't even seen Max. But I've seen the boys one way and another. Those boys who've never failed to be good to me. They're just the same. But to my mind there's just one feller could have worded that note that way. It's Jub——"

McLagan stirred.

"Leave it at that, Claire," he broke in quickly. "It don't matter who wrote it. But I'm kind of glad for that note, seeing I was away. But I'm right here now, and you belong to me." He stood up. He moved to an open window. For some moments he stood there with his back turned, silently gazing out on the distant dome of the Speedway.

Claire watched him. His square shoulder seemed to fill up the whole of the window opening. He was so big, and strong, and——

"Ivor!"

Her voice was low but urgent. The man turned after a moment and Claire drew a sharp breath. His face was almost livid with a consuming rage. He came back to her and stood before her chair.

"I'm going to settle with Max," he said, through lips that scarcely moved. "No," he denied, as Claire was about to protest. "It's up to me," he went on harshly. "That dirty Dago swine threatened you and would have carried out his threat if those Aurora boys hadn't jumped in. Don't you see? I do. Max would have put a bunch of sharps on to you. He'd have got at you by every trick of his dirty Dago mind until he'd got you skinned of your last dollar and were ready to squeal for mercy. Then, utterly helpless, he'd—By God, he's going to pay. He's

going to pay me. He's fat and rich out of the weaknesses of the poor folk of this city, is he? We'll see. We'll——"

"No, no, Ivor!" Claire sprang from her chair. Her hands were held out in appeal. The terrible purpose shining in the man's eyes frightened her. "Don't do a thing. My dear, my dear, there's been no harm done. Think of it. Thanks to those folk of the Aurora Clan, I've a complete laugh on him. I've a fortune, almost, in Victor's bank. What does it matter? Sure it doesn't, and then—and then in the fall we'll be married and away from Beacon. No, no, Ivor, don't look that way. Don't act that way. You scare me. Besides, he's powerful. He can buy up the toughs of this place. You might get—No, boy, I can't spare you now. I can't. I surely won't. Ivor, promise me."

The girl's appeal was not without effect. The man's ferocity seemed to ease. And she almost fancied a smile was somewhere back of his eyes. He shook his head.

"Max will have to pay—me," he said grimly. "You don't need to worry for me, Claire. Max can do nothing to hurt—me."

"But he can. He will. He——"

The girl's protest died weakly away. She caught her breath. A flash of thought swept through her mind as she gazed into the stern, strong face she had learned at last to love so deeply.

Then the silence was broken. And it was she who was speaking again.

"Ivor," she said, in low, gentle tones, but in a manner which plainly displayed her resolve. "If anything happens to Max through what I've told you, I'll—I'll never forgive you. I know what I'm saying. I'm saying it for you. Do you understand, dear? My love for you is so big that I won't have you fall

for a personal animosity. No, no. I won't stand for it. I want you to remember, too, that but for Max and his Speedway I'd still be doing our rags of laundry down on Lively Creek. Remember that. I've beaten the game and I'm going to quit."

The man raised a hand and passed it over his hair.

"You mean all that, Claire?" he asked.

The girl gazed squarely up into his hot eyes.

"I surely do, dear. There will be no——"

"Don't say it, little girl." The man's smile had broken out at last. "I know. There'll be no marrying me in the fall. But there will." He reached out and caught her in his arms. "There will be, my dear. Because Max can go clear for me. I'll not do a thing since you ask it, since you order it. No, little girl, don't look questions at me. And don't ask 'em. I can see them back of your dandy eyes. I just love you to death. And I want you to feel the game of life as I see it needs to be a straight one. I'm quitting now. I've still got things to do. To-morrow I'm going to pick up Len at the coast. He and I'll have big work for maybe a week. After that I'm through, and I'll bring him right along to tell you of your Jim. So long, little Claire. I guess that note'll still stand good. You'll be safe till I get along back."

The daylight was passing as McLagan left Claire's home. He hurried away down the unmade road leading back into the eastern purlieus of the city. He came abreast of the Speedway which had so many turbulent reminders for him. But he passed it by, and thrust from him the leaping anger the sight of it inspired. He crossed over to the Plaza Hotel where he ate a hurried meal. Then, later, he passed again out into the night, and his way lay westwards, where the moonlit waters of the lake shone still and cold.

CHAPTER XX

THE LAST OF THE MOVING SHADOW

McLAGAN was nursing his team. For once his driving speed was moderated. But then he knew the call he had yet to make upon his ponies. They had already made the journey from Beacon to the coastal harbour, which, one day, in his dreams, he visualized as a flourishing seaport, the rail base of a fresh route to the great interior radiating about Beacon Glory. Miles away to the West lay the port of Seward where the Government railroad, cutting in to the heart of Alaska, began its hopelessly unprofitable career towards Fairbanks. But no thought of such a failure attached to the railroad in his mind. Oil and coal would preclude all possibility of that. Furthermore the vast capital of his Corporation lay behind him. And lack of capital was the thing which had so far made a failure of the Alaskan peninsula which had at one time been known as "Seward's Folly."

Now he was leaving the coast behind again, and beside him, on the spring seat of his buckboard, was the bronzed creature he had come in search of. The man's baggage was enduring the violent joltings of the trail on the rack behind them as the two men

talked of the thing which had at last brought them together again.

"It sort of seems like yesterday I was in Beacon," Len Stern said after awhile, gazing out over the broken hill country through which they were driving. "Say, I mind the landmarks as if I'd never quit. You know, for all it's a tough proposition it's my home country in a way. I don't mean I was born here. No. I'd hate to think that. But—Gee! I was glad quitting Perth. Man, I've had heat enough to make a feller need blankets in hell."

There was a smile in the dark eyes of the man who had journeyed thousands of miles to answer the call which the other had sent out on the sound waves. Perhaps his answer had been the more ready for the fact of those memories stirring now.

McLagan shook up his ponies.

"Well, we could do with some of it around this territory in winter, Len. But it's a queer sort of 'come-back' for you. Maybe it's tough. I don't know how you're fixed. We haven't had a deal of time to talk that sort of stuff. But I fetched you along, and I want to say right here, if it makes things better for you, you're my guest all the way from Perth to here and back again, if you want to go. I want to tell you I've hit a trail that's likely going to set your eyes wide, and make you guess you're dreaming. But you won't be dreaming. No. You'll be wide awake looking on some of the worst dirt lying back of human nature. I'm taking you right out now to get a look at the *Imperial*, the ship your poor dead partner sailed for home in, and never reached. She blew in on this coast without a soul on board, and with her name changed. And with—— But we'll leave it that way till you've set your two eyes on to her. And meanwhile you can hand me some stuff I'm yearning to hear about.

After we're through with this trip there'll be some more for us to do. But that can wait. Then I'll run you right into Beacon where maybe you'll be glad to hand the story of things to a lone mother, and the sister who's still mourning a dead brother."

The dark face of the man from Australia was turned on his companion. McLagan had always been a dominant personality to him in the old days. It was the same still. His eyes were questioning, but he remained silent. Now that he knew this old friend was at the other end of the thing that had called him back to Alaska he was content to await developments. And McLagan went on in that direct fashion which was so characteristic of him.

"Before I get your yarn I fancy handing you mine. You see, the obligation's all on me. I'm marrying Jim's sister this fall, and maybe that's partly where I come in on your play. But it isn't all. No. This thing had got me before I knew about that. Jim was always a friend of mine, as you know, and when I learned his ship had gone down, and he'd been drowned, it hit me for myself as well as for Claire and his mother. Then when this ship blew in, and I located that it was the *Imperial*, and she hadn't gone down in mid-ocean, it took me guessing hard. Now the thing I want of you is identification. It was you who chartered the vessel, I guess, and you'll know it again. And maybe, you'll know the skipper again—if you were to see him. That's what I want of you. I'm reckoning Jim was aboard that ship with a big wad of dust. I'm reckoning the skipper feller knew about the dust and yearned for it so that murder looked good to him."

Len Stern's eyes were on the sturdy backs of the ponies. They were hard, relentless, as they contemplated the sweating brown coats where the trail dust lay caked upon them.

"He sailed with more than half a million dollars of dust," he said quickly. "And the plan was he'd trade it where he could, touching in at ports where best it could be done, without too many questions. Julian Caspar was the shipmaster and owner, and he stood on a swell commission. He surely knew of the stuff."

McLagan nodded, and drew his team down to a walk as they mounted a sharp incline towards a wide, windswept plateau.

"So, feeling that way, murder might well look good to him?" he said.

"Yes. Feeling that way. And Jim not guessing."

"What like was this boy, Caspar?"

"All sorts of a hard seaman."

Len sniffed at the fresh fall breeze which seemed so good to him, as the buckboard cleared the incline on to the plateau. An immense view opened out. It was a broad, treeless expanse with a wide front of purple hills in the distance.

"Say," he went on after a moment. "I made the deal with him. I collected him in Perth. And I'd say he was a boy to fix himself right on to a man's memory. He was quite a chunk of a man, broad, and strong, and medium in height. He was clean-shaven and rough. But the thing standing out in my mind was his eyes——"

"Ah!"

Len looked round sharply.

"Have you seen 'em?" he asked.

"Maybe." McLagan nodded. "Blue. Pale, queer blue, like the eyes of some sort of dead fish."

"That's the boy. Ther' ain't two pairs of eyes like his in the world. You surely have seen 'em."

"Yep. I guess I must have seen 'em."

McLagan whipped up his ponies and set out across the plateau at a steady gait.

"Now, Len," he went on. "We got twenty good miles to make before we reach my shanty. And we can do a heap of talk between this and that lay out. It don't seem to me that we can do better than hand each other our two yarns. Maybe you'll be glad to hand me all you can of the things that happened after you quit here with Jim, till you got along now. Then I'll hand you the whole story I know. But before you begin I want to say one thing. It's this. That half a million of dust, or the bulk of it, is coming right back to you as the one partner left. It's lying now where no harm's likely to come to it. Jim's gone. There's no guess to that. So the stuff's yours. And that's just between you and me. You understand? Claire don't need any. Nor Jim's mother. Those folks are my care. Now you can start right in with your talk."

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The two men climbed out of the lazaret. They had explored the wreck from end to end. Now they passed out of the alieyway under the break of the vessel's poop, and came to the main hatch. McLagan seated himself upon it, and beckoned his companion to a seat beside him. Curiously enough the seat he invited Len Stern to was the exact spot where once Sasa Mannik had seated himself, and from which he had ultimately fled in terror.

Len sprawled himself upon the hatch which was lying over at the sharp angle of the vessel's perilous list. And his attitude left him in full view of the litter of the deck which had resulted from the half-breed's raids upon the vessel's gear.

There was a tremendous change for the worse in the wreck. More than two months of every condition of weather had made desperate inroads. The vessel's whole position had been detrimentally shifted. The

seas, playing on the broken hull at high tide, had wrought havoc, and she looked to be only hanging together awaiting the final belabourings which would ultimately complete the work of her destruction. Every removable article of her gear that had appealed to the predatory instincts of Sasa Mannik had been carried away. And she looked now just what she was, a poor tattered thing awaiting her dismal end.

McLagan was scarcely concerned for the change in her. There was no sentiment about him in the matter of this ugly relic of a bad story. He would be glad enough to see the last of her—now. She had lasted sufficiently long for him to complete the work he had set his hand to. No. The oil man was concerned for other things. And now, as he sat beside his companion on the hatch, his searching gaze was turned skywards.

At the moment no sun was visible. But then the sky was full of loose cloud that came and passed under a high top wind. Just now a heavy cloud had obscured the sun. It would pass. It was passing. And then——

"It's all like yesterday to me," Len Stern said as he gazed out over the litter. "You see, Mac," he went on, with a comprehensive movement of the arm, "I lived with all this days coming up the coast from Perth. This is Caspar's ship all right, all right. It was more than half crewed by Chinks. I wonder what's become of 'em. There were two officers, and a third that was a promoted seaman. I doubt any of 'em having officers' tickets. I'm surely wondering about them. Say, in that cabin there was only a meal for one."

His dark face frowned in concentrated thought. After a moment he went on again.

"Those two empty chests in the lazaret were the chests our bags of dust were stowed in. Jim and I,

and Caspar stowed 'em there ourselves. Ther' wasn't a soul else wise to them. No. That was our play. We couldn't afford to take chances with a crew of Chinks. I wonder. But the motor launches are gone. Both of 'em. They cost me a pile in Perth. They were seagoing craft for Jim and Caspar to use in making their trade. You see, they could be run without any of the crew. We meant leaving those darn toughs without a guess."

"I see." McLagan's eyes were full of thought as they watched the slowly passing cloud. "You had two launches? I'd wondered. You see the lifeboats had been left intact. I didn't guess there was a second."

"You located one?"

Jim's question came alertly.

"Yes. Where were they stowed?"

"On the poop-deck. They were kept aft for convenience and safety."

"I see."

Len stirred and sat up.

"Tell me, Mac. You reckon sure Caspar murdered Jim?"

"Sure."

"What about the—crew?"

McLagan shrugged.

"We're going to get that—later. I'd say anything might have happened them. Maybe they were reckoned in his murder schedule. Maybe they were glad to get away easy in the second launch. But we'll locate all that—later."

There was a curious grimness in McLagan's emphasis on his final word. And he glanced quickly up at the sadly drooping yards as they creaked under a puff of stirring wind. The cloud bank had nearly passed, and the prevailing gloom was steadily lightening.

"I don't just get how you located he'd murdered Jim." Len went on curiously. "Was it sort of circumstances? He knew of the gold. You've seen Caspar and know the sort of tough he is. You've located the gold. Maybe there's more back of your mind than you've told."

McLagan shook his head. Then he flung out a hand pointing down the deck. The sun had broken out, and the wreck was bathed in its generous light.

"No, boy," he said. "Look right down the deck there. You're asking the way I know Jim was murdered by Caspar. It's there for you to see, and I was waiting on it. Am I crazy? Are we all crazy? Is that real or imagination? What is it anyway? There's Jim right there. That queer fool shadow that's trying its best to walk along towards us and don't ever get nearer. That's Jim. I've seen him before, and I wanted you to see him only I wasn't sure the sun would shine right. You see, that poor darn thing only haunts this deck when the sun shines. See, boy? You can see it? Eh? It's a queer shadow. It's the outline of a big man as plain as the eye can see. And it throws another shadow right on the deck. Am I wrong? No. I'm not wrong. Could you mistake that big, tall body and gait. You, who've worked alongside Jim Carver. No. Jim was done right up on that spot. Maybe folks 'ud guess it's a crazy notion. But it's so I'm dead sure. And now you've seen it you'll be dead sure, too. Say, get a good look and we'll get back up to my shanty and eat. And to-morrow we're beating it right up into the hills where—Come on, boy."

But Len Stern was in no hurry to quit. His dark eyes were held fascinated by the queer shadow. Could he see it? Of course he could. It was there plain enough for anybody to see. There was no question

in his mind. The thing was what McLagan had said it was. There could be no mistaking it. He was without any superstitious qualm. There was wonder, amazement in his eyes, but none of the panic which the vision had inspired in others. So he sat there fascinated. That was all. And McLagan was forced to urge him again.

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It was a little backwater hidden in a rift in the granite hills. Its mouth opening on to the waters of the Lias River was a ten foot split in the sheer face of bald rock. But inside it was quite different. Within a few yards of the absurd opening it widened abruptly, with sloping, funnel-like sides that were graciously clad by a wealth of spruce growing up the hillsides, and staunchly protected from the devastating winds above. It was a remote, stuffy spot, humid and dank, and a tangle of undergrowth profusely crowded the water's edge.

How far the widening stream ran back would have been difficult to determine. Maybe it was one of the many little hill streams which went to feed the great river at the time when the spring warmth transformed the winter snows. Again it might easily have been one of those tiny recesses which have no other meaning than the impulse of Nature in the remote years of the world's birth. Almost on the instant of entry upon the widening water the ultimate was obscured by the jutting of a hill slope. The course of the water swung away round a sharp bend, lost amidst the flourishing vegetation that looked to make its navigation impossible.

Cy Liskard was standing on the bank at the water's edge. It was at a place where the undergrowth had been laboriously cleared. The ground was a-litter with fresh stumps where the cut had been made,

and young shoots of new growth were already seeking to repair the human damage inflicted.

His boat was lying in the water at his feet. It was moored fast to a tree stump. It was laden with his outfit for a prolonged journey. But the man was gazing about him with a queer look in his pale blue eyes. It was a look of puzzlement, of incredulous and angry surprise. It was the look of a man whose mind has become well-nigh paralysed by the realisation of a disaster of appalling nature.

He gazed out over the water searching stupidly in the depths of the crowding vegetation. His gaze wandered to the outline of the jutting hill which hid the beyond. It turned back to the opening on to the river in the same hopeless fashion. Then it came again to the narrow landing upon which he was standing.

At last he bestirred himself. He moved back to higher ground and sat down on a boulder. And his eyes were turned upon the soft soil in which his own feet had made such deep impressions. He followed his own foot-prints to where he had first stepped ashore from his boat, and quickly realised that there were other footprints. Many others. A perfect maze of them.

He drew a deep breath. It was the first sign he had given beyond the curious expression of his usually expressionless eyes. He was staring at a deeply driven stake within a yard of the water's edge. A hemp rope was lashed about it. It was securely knotted in a fashion he knew by heart. But the rope had been severed, and its end lay close by on the ground. The thing that it had held had gone. Vanished. And he knew now that others had found this remote spot, others had ventured up that narrow rift in the rocks. Others had located the hiding-place which had served him for so long. Who?

Who were those others? And the mind behind his queer eyes was searching the possibilities of the thing that had happened.

He remained seated for minutes that were rapidly prolonged. It was more than half an hour before he again bestirred himself. And in that half hour he had searched every avenue of explanation that presented itself to him.

He came down to the water's edge again. He deliberately cast off the moorings of his canoe and took his place at the paddle. Then he headed the sturdy vessel inland and vanished round the bend.

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The day was well advanced when Cy Liskard reappeared on the highway of the Lias, and turned the nose of his vessel towards the sea. For an hour he paddled feverishly at a speed that flung even the ebbing tide high against the bows of his little craft.

His destination was definite in his mind. It was a picture that now loomed full of foreboding since the thing he had discovered in his long concealed hiding-place. He came to the rockbound landing he knew by heart. He swung his boat out. Then with all the power of his body he struggled with the tide race. Slowly, foot by foot, he gained way. The sturdy vessel nosed into the stream making tremendous leeway. But finally his efforts were rewarded. He drove up to the landing and leapt ashore.

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The man had vanished within the narrow entrance to the cavern that lay back in the granite wall of the cliffs. His boat was moored fore and aft to the familiar boulders. The tide race held the moorings taut and wearing upon the harsh surface of the stones

But the little vessel was secure. Soon the last of the ebb would have spent itself, and the period of dead water would relieve the strain.

It was a silent world which the presence of the boat made no impression upon. The air was alive with circling sea-fowl whose mournful note only served to increase the sense of utter loneliness. Grey and bleak, the wide expanse of the river mouth looked to be the very gate of Desolation.

An hour had passed since Cy Liskard's landing. And in that time the sky had changed its aspect from the brilliant light of early fall to the grey overcast which the coming flood was bringing up with it. A ruffle of wind stirred. It came chill and keen off the far ocean, and a few driven raindrops splashed on the bosom of the waters. It was a passing phase. It was that queer atmospheric effort which so much suggests that in every changing of her mood Nature knows the pangs of labour.

Of a sudden the man re-appeared. He came hastily. He came almost as though he were reeling under a physical shock. His soulless eyes were strangely alight. They were frigidly ablaze with a light that transformed them into a furious expression of the mind behind them. His weather-stained face was almost ghastly in its sickly hue. The lines about his mouth were grimly drawn. He was breathing hard, and the great hands that swung at his sides were clenched with the force of a man about to strike.

At the cavern entrance he paused with an abruptness that was almost a lurch. He turned and gazed into the shadowed vault behind him. Then, of a sudden, he raised his clenched fists above his head in a terrible gesture of impotent threat. Then they came slowly, slowly to his sides again. And in a moment he started towards his boat.

CHAPTER XXI

JULIAN CASPAR AT BAY

CY LISKARD was squatting on his rolled blankets. The interior of his log shanty was disordered. For all the man's physical roughness, for all the conditions of the life he lived, his hut on the hills above the Lias River had always been something scrupulous in its neatness. Now its interior was completely dishevelled. It was an atmosphere associated with final departure, with absolute quittance.

But it was something more. It was as if the man had searched it completely with a view to the destruction of everything that could leave a clue to the identity of its occupant. There was a pile of stuff lying upon the hard-beaten earth floor awaiting destruction, and outside the door a large fire was doing its share in the work of concealment. Then, too, down on the creek below there was a great smouldering heap which represented the complete destruction of the elaborate sluice box and the general gear of a gold worker's craft that could not easily be otherwise removed.

The man had done his work systematically and without apparent haste. And now he sat on his blankets gazing out through the open doorway on

the devouring flames of his fire. There was the pile on the floor yet to be consumed. There was the removal of his blankets and kit. Then there was the shanty itself to be disposed of. After that——?

The man's dead eyes were more than usually expressionless for all the teeming thought of his brain. He was lost in one of those fierce trains of thought which leave the body completely relaxed, inert.

He had returned from the river mouth at a speed that rarely drove him. Apprehension had pursued him every mile of the way. But it was not physical fear. No. It was something deeper, more abiding than that. He was beset with concern for an invisible, intangible threat that seemed to be enveloping him. A threat that was clear enough in its work of despoliation without a sign of how or whence it came. Fury was driving him hard. Fury, and that other thing that left him groping for the thing he must do.

Now as he sat waiting for the fire outside to do its work, he was contemplating the courses that were open to him. And his mind and brutish nature, being what they were, looked first and foremost for some method of retaliation upon an unseen, unknown, but not wholly unguessed agency that was operating for his hurt.

No. It was not unguessed. Two agencies sprang to his mind. There was the memory of those "fool" figures in their hooded white cloaks who had surrounded him while a rawhide rope dangled before his eyes. For all he derided their methods they were not easily forgotten. Then there was that other. The man he had sought to kill, and who, through his friends, had contrived to outwit him. A queer desperation was driving. He knew he must act quickly, at once. But even the feeling of desperation

and the uncertainty of the thing about him could not rob him of his lust for vengeance. His lust to kill.

His plans had been urgently completed. He knew he must quit his mountain retreat. He must defy everything and reach Beacon with all speed. His credit was lying at Victor Burn's bank. That was his, which he believed no power could rob him of. He must collect it at once. It was all that had been left to him. And with that in his possession he would be free to devote himself to the vengeance which looked a thousand times more desirable to him now.

He rose from his seat and replenished the fire outside with the collected heap in the shack. It was the last. He had destroyed the last of his makeshift furnishings, and only his camp outfit and his treasured weapons were left to encumber his journey. And now he sat again, having closed the door to defend himself against the fierce heat and the smoke of his fire.

Yes. Beacon must be his first objective. It would be easy enough. At the bank he was just an ordinary customer. There was, there could be no doubt about his credit there. He was wholly unknown except as a gold man from the hills. There was nothing against him except for the sentence of that absurd bunch who called themselves the Aurora Clan. They were powerless to interfere—— He stirred uneasily.

No. He would give them no chance. He would give no one any chance. He would descend upon the bank at the busiest time of the day, and be gone with his cash before a soul was wise to his presence in the city. Then——

He dismissed Beacon from his mind and his thought was caught and held by a wrecked ship that was lying on the rocks at the mouth of the Alsek

River. And curiously enough the mental vision of it robbed him of something of the even train of his urgent thought. A queer feeling took hold of him in the pit of the stomach. It came of a sudden, and he stirred uneasily, and strove to moisten his lips with a tongue that had somehow become almost dry.

The stare of his dead eyes displayed nothing of his emotion. They looked and looked squarely at the lateral logs of the wall in front of him. Even the flutter of the torn cotton which covered the window directly above where he was gazing drew not a vestige of his attention. And it was not until the loose cotton ripped with a screaming tear that his gaze came back to the things about him. He looked up with a start to find himself gazing into the ominous ring of the muzzle of a heavy gun. It was thrust through the aperture of the window where the cotton had been torn away.

"Sit right there, Julian Caspar. Don't move a little bit. Not a finger, boy, or you're as dead as Jim Carver you murdered for his gold."

It was spoken quietly, almost gently, in a voice whose tones startled the man on his blankets and left him utterly unmoving. His queer eyes were fixed on the dark face peering in at him through the aperture of the window from behind the threatening gun.

But the whole position underwent a change on the instant. The door was flung open and Ivor McLagan thrust his way in.

"Up with those hands, Caspar," he cried roughly. And his own levelled gun enforced the sharp order. "Right up—this time. That's better. You didn't do it right at the Speedway. You're learning manners. No. Keep 'em up. Len Stern's here and is yearning to sift his hands through your pockets. Get busy, Len. I'll watch his monkey tricks."

The man on the blankets gave no sign, and his eyes helped the illusion of submission. His hands were thrust above his head while he watched the man he hated most in the world. But Ivor bulked large and fiercely threatening behind the deadly automatic he was gripping. And the other had reason enough to know there was no play-game where McLagan was concerned.

In less than a minute the work was completed. Len Stern, relieved of his hold-up through the window, came to his task on the run. The man was deprived of his gun and a pocketful of cartridge clips. The rifle leaning against the wall was unloaded and put out of harm's way. And furthermore a long, razor-like sheath knife was transferred to the keeping of the man from Australia.

"That all, Len?" McLagan spoke in the harsh tone of a man without mercy. "We're taking no chances with a feller who's done up a ship's company. Is he harmless?"

"As a babe."

Len Stern left the man and moved clear. Then he waited, leaning with his elbow propped on the window framing while McLagan lowered his threatening weapon.

The engineer's quick eyes took in the details of the dishevelled interior.

"Making a quick getaway, Caspar, eh?" he snapped sharply. "Making a break for the open where the thing lying back of you's not going to come again." He shook his head. "You can't escape that, boy, not as long as you live. And when you're dead I guess you'll get its consequences. Say, a feller can't commit cold-blooded murder without it leaving a hell of a stain, if it's only on the brutal mind that designed it. Can you guess why we're here? Can you guess why Len Stern's come all

along from Perth in Australia? Sure you can. But I'll tell you in case you don't guess right. Len Stern's got along to make sure you swing by your darn neck for murdering his partner, and goodness knows how many more. You can drop your hands."

The man lowered his arms and it was noticeable that his fists were tightly clenched. His eyes displayed nothing but cold contemplation as they looked back into McLagan's face. Those looking on, observing his every movement with the closest scrutiny, were not without a feeling of appreciation for the sheer nerve he was displaying. But they were neither of them deceived. A storm lay behind those cold eyes. It was raging, consuming. And it was expressed in the two fiercely clenched fists.

The man shook his head.

"You're wrong," he said calmly, with a shrug. "You're dead wrong. I'm not worried a thing with any memory of murder. I don't have to be. I don't know this feller you call Len Stern. And as for his partner I can't guess the thing you're talking. I'm a gold man scratching over the dirt of this creek. And my name's Liskard—Cy Liskard. You've a hold-up on me for, I suppose, the stuff you reckon to get out of me. You'll get not an ounce. I'm quitting for the reason the show don't pay. Well?"

It was consummately done. It was too well done. McLagan laughed coldly.

"We'll cut all that right out," he said. He dropped back to the door framing and leant his big body against it, but his gun was in his hand ready for instant use. "This isn't any old game of bluff. It's just cold business that's going through as we fixed it. You can keep that junk for the law courts where you'll stand up to answer for your play. For the moment the things concerning us are toting you right in to Beacon, and handing you over to Alan

Goodchurch. Then you'll be passed on to Fairbanks I'm not wise if they use an electric chair there, or hang a boy like you right out of hand. It don't signify anyway. They don't treat murder easy in Fairbanks, which makes me feel good passing you along in that direction. Your ponies are fixed for your journey. You've set things that way, and I'm obliged. We'll be able to travel the quicker. You can get up off those blankets. You're going to start right away. I can't give you even blanket room on the journey. You see, we're going to make Beacon quick."

But the man who had been called Julian Caspar made no attempt to obey. He stirred where he sat, but that was all. McLagan was watching. He was watching with every faculty alert. He was looking to read behind that baffling mask which was his victim's greatest asset.

It was that slight shift of position that betrayed. It was an unconscious movement impelled by some inner qualm, a qualm similar to that which had assailed him when he had thought of the wreck at the mouth of the Alsek River. And a feeling of satisfaction warmed McLagan as he waited for the reply he saw coming.

The man spoke harshly, but without any sign of the fury that was driving him. He had himself under a control that rarely enough gave way, and was strongest in emergency.

"You're talking a whole lot, McLagan," he said, "but you're not talking the way of a feller who's dead sure of the thing he's putting on the other feller." He shook his head. "Try again. Maybe that way you'll make me feel like the boy you're reckoning to make me believe I am. A hold-up's generally got more behind it than seems. You see you're not a sheriff, or a law officer. You're just an

oil man. I haven't seen a sign of any warrant for my arrest. Do you get me?"

McLagan smiled at the shrewd retort. He was more than prepared for it. He signed to Len Stern, while his gun was raised ever so slightly covering his man.

"That's all right, Caspar," he said. "I'm not worrying for details. You can think the thing you please. We won't waste time in discussion. Just fix those bracelets right on his wrists, Len, and then go fix his ponies ready for the start. No, Caspar. Don't move. Not a move. As sure as God I'll fix you right here. And I'll fix you better than the mess you made of things down at my home place. I told you then you'll hang, and that's sure why I'm here now. That's it, Len," he went on, as the irons were clipped on the man's wrists. "Now go and see to his plugs while I look to him."

The two men remained watching each other in silence after Len Stern had passed out of the shack. It seemed as if a tremendous silent conflict of will was raging. The hard face of Julian Caspar was apparently unyielding under the hate that no power of his seemed able to abate. The eyes of the other were harshly compelling, and kept the queer dead eyes of his victim unblinkingly observing him. McLagan's decision was clear in his mind. It was impossible to judge of the thing passing in the mind of the other as he sat with his shackled hands resting on his drawn-up knees.

At last the prisoner shook his head.

"You're needing something, McLagan," he said, his face slightly relaxing. "Maybe I can guess the thing it is. Well, if you're ready to hand out the price I'll sell what you need."

McLagan drew a deep breath. Quite suddenly a curious feeling of admiration stirred within him.

The man's words and manner inspired him with a sense of his own inferiority. His shrewdness and nerve amazed him. He felt he had been read like an open book. He failed utterly to realise that this man was fighting for something he treasured above all else—his life. And knew full well that it was forfeit unless his wit should adequately serve him.

He nodded.

"I surely do," he said quietly. "And when a murderer is captured, and the irons are fixed right, there's only one price he can ask. That's freedom."

"That's so. Well?"

The relaxing was gone from the man's face. McLagan read the anxiety lying behind that final interrogation.

"I let you go once before, Caspar," he went on coldly. "I told you then you'd hang, you were born to hang. That's why I let you go. I'm still sure you'll hang. That's why I'm ready to let you loose on this hill country again. But if you want me to do that, why, you've got to hand me the story of your ship, the *Imperial*, from A to Z. There's no lies 'll serve you. Len Stern and I know enough to check you up all the time. You can only get away on the truth. In return we'll release you now, right here. There's the hill country back of here, and the Canadian border beyond. It's a dog's chance. You're tough, and maybe you can get through. I don't know and don't care. It's a chance of a respite before that hanging which is coming your way."

McLagan ceased speaking and the sound of Len Stern passing outside came in the silence that followed. Then Caspar cleared a throat that was dry with fierce anxiety. And suspicion lurked behind his expressionless eyes.

"Why d'you need that story? What's the dirty game behind it? When a feller like you gets his

hands on a man he reckons to have done murder, why, for a story, is he ready to hand him a getaway." He shook his head. "The price is right, McLagan. But ther's a snag somewhere. It looks like your case is bad. It looks like you're maybe a bad payer. It looks like ther's things to you you ain't yearning to have around in the light of open court."

Again he shook his head.

But the challenge left McLagan quite unruffled. His smile was derisive as his answer came on the instant.

"That's all right, Caspar," he said. "It can look just as it pleases you to make it look. I don't care a cent. The only thing is Len's coming right back. I can hear him. And so can you. The ponies, I guess, are fixed. Well, we're starting for Beacon right away, or we aren't. You can please your darn self. The price will be paid or not, as you choose. But you've only five seconds to choose in."

Caspar stirred.

"You swear to get out an' leave me free?"

"On those terms, yes."

"Then you can have the yarn."

"The simple facts?"

"Yes—curse you!"

The malevolent fury in the man's final curse was the epitome of all his pent feeling. McLagan was his one object of hate. And he was driven to bend before his will. He knew the desperate nature of the thing he was doing. He knew the risk of it all. The evidence he was about to put into his hated enemy's hand. But he knew, being the man he was, and with shackles on his wrists, that it was his only chance. So he yielded. But his yielding had only come with his recognition that the shackles holding him were the official shackles of the United States Government, and must clearly have been

put into the hands of these men for their present purpose.

Julian Caspar was still sitting on his piled blankets. McLagan was still leaning against the doorway with his gun in evidence. Len Stern was propped, as before, where the cotton hung loose from the window framing. The monotonous tones of the prisoner's voice broke up the stillness of the atmosphere of the place. He had been talking for some time. He was not looking at his captors. His dead eyes were on the log wall in front of him. And his gaze suggested a mind reviewing in sequence a series of pictures which gave him not a moment of mental unease. He was transferring his stock at a price. And only was it the payment of the price for which he was concerned.

"It was too easy," he was saying, with a sound that was perhaps a mirthless imitation of a laugh. "It's queer ther's such darn fools running around loose. That boy, Carver, and Stern, here, surely needed wet-nurses before they set out to handle a bunch of dust the way they thought. Why should I stand around on a lousy commission with the stuff lying safe under my hatches, and with only a bum crew of Chinks, an' a few poor whites to deal with." He shook his head. "Not on your life. I'd have stood for equal share. I'd have let that boy live for some other guy to do up later. But he guessed to hand me commission. Me, who was the only thing that could help him handle his stuff right. No. My mind was fixed the moment Stern an' me signed our charter. There was haf a million of stuff to trade, and I guessed I knew who would do the trading."

He paused and shifted his position. His audience remained unmoving but watchful.

"I got him in the doldrums south of the line," he

went on, after a moment. "It didn't need argument how best I could fix him. He was soft in his foolishness. It was in the night. There wasn't any darn moon, and a thin cloud hid up the stars. There wasn't a breath of wind, an' it was as hot as hell. I guessed a walk along the deck would be better than blankets on a night like that, and he guessed that way too. Then I'd got another thought back of my head. You see, I knew the monkey tricks of the sailorman, whether Chink or white. In the doldrums without a breeze, you can never keep a watch on deck out of their blankets at night. The midnight watch came on deck, an' the others went to quarters. Then us two folks started pacing the main deck for cool. You see, the moment the watch had changed they'd oozed off for'ard and rolled into their blankets, and we were left to the main deck where even the man at the wheel couldn't guess the thing happening. There was only the officer of the watch. I waited for him. He went below to get a drink, I guess. That was my time. That boy and me were away up near the winch. I jerked that long knife of mine in through the neck of his thick pea-coat. It went deep and far, and he dropped in my arms without a sound. It's the Indian trick of skewering a man's heart, and comes easy with practice. I heaved him to the rail and dropped him over, and the thing was done without a mess, and in a few seconds. Then I waited for the officer. I treated him as he came out from the cabin, and got rid of him, too. It was not because he knew a thing. But I looked to make an atmosphere for those who were to learn things later. Then I dealt with the boy at the wheel, and left the ship with a loose helm. After that I went below and waited. The thing I guessed happened. The ship yawed and was set flat aback. And in awhile I was shouted for by one of the watch. I cleared from

my bunk and raised hell till he'd told me the thing that had happened. It was a play game to me. It was an elegant show. I mustered the watches, and looked for the absentees. I located the first officer was missing. Then I got wise that Carver, too, was nowhere around. Then I raised every sort of hell a feller born to the sea knows about. And in the end had the second officer log a scrap. A "hold-up" by one of the Chink crew—identity unguessed. And it worked smooth and easy, as I knew it would when dealing with a bunch of sailor toughs without sense between 'em the size of a buck louse. Maybe it was—too easy."

There was a moment of reflective silence before the man spoke again. McLagan made no attempt to urge him. A queer nausea affected him deeply as he watched the man who now that he had embarked upon his story seemed rather to enjoy dwelling on the hideous incidents of it. Len Stern was less calm. All the youth in him was aflame. The cold satisfaction of Caspar in telling of the slaughter of his partner drove him almost beyond his powers of restraint.

"The game was only at its start," Caspar went on at last. "I'd got it clear cut in my mind. We were coming up through the big islands, and at first I thought of running for the China coast. But it didn't take long to show me it was liable to be a bad move with twelve Chinks aboard out of a crew of eighteen. I changed plan right away. I'd run for Alaska where gold is found. I'd deal with the crew one way or another, and abandon ship, and run the gold inland by motor launch where its presence wouldn't set a flutter stirring. From the start luck ran with me, but it was only later I was to learn how well it was running.

"My next move was obvious to a feller looking to

lose himself and his bunch," he continued, with his queer eyes lighting unwholesomely. "I was my own wireless man. It was mostly a hobby with me, and I'd set it up myself. I got busy and sent out a distress signal. I sent it out telling the darn fools who picked it up I was foundering a thousand miles from where I happened to be sailing. I kept sending it to make sure, and I guess it didn't let me down. As a result my craft was fathoms deep in the South Pacific. That left me free with leisure to fix the crew when, and the way, I wanted 'em."

He drew a deep breath and once he raised his eyes derisively to the frowning dark face of Len Stern. Then he went on at once.

"I wanted that crew for awhile. We'd a mighty big piece of sailing to do before I put the rest of my plan into operation. It's queer, now I think of it, how my luck stood by. We steered E.N.E. after we'd cleared the islands. And it came on to blow hard. But it was a fair breeze, dead on our quarter, and I carried on every stitch of canvas we could spread. There were times when those darn Chinks grouched. They came aft, an' once looked ugly. But I didn't let go. No. I needed 'em yet. The only feller I didn't need was the second officer. Well, I took council with the Chink steward I carried. He was a boy who knew me good, and who'd worked for me since ever I'd held a master's ticket. He was handy. I guess he was quicker with a knife than any yeller mongrel I've ever seen. Well, it was blowing hard and a dead black night, and when morning came and the wind ceased there was a dead officer overboard and only the boy who acted as third and me to run the ship. And so we came along up towards the fifties, where we ran into elegant fair weather like spring, for all it was dead winter. I guess the Pacific's well named.

"Then the thing that made me feel real good—at first—happened. It happened at change of watch mid-day. The bunch were waiting amidships to take over, standing around smoking and chewing like the lousy crowd they were. The sun was beating down fine on the litter of lumber stacked on the deck. I was on the poop-deck watching those boys and guessing about things. And in the midst of it I saw them boys take a hunch to themselves peeking down the deck. I looked too. An' then—Say, you've seen it, McLagan. Yes. It was there. Right at the spot where I jerked my knife under his collar-bone. It was there just as crazy a thing as I ever see. But it was there, and stayed there, just as long as the sun shone. I wanted to laff. Then I didn't. Then I thought hard an' waited, and pretended I hadn't seen.

"It was two days later the play began," he went on, his manner becoming harsher. "They came aft. The whole darn bunch. An' I kind of knew the thing coming. I was ready for 'em. I saw my whole play in a jump. That queer thing had been there each day, an' all the time the sun shone. Oh, it made me sick, their fool slobber. But I listened. You see, we were near to the coast, and the weather was elegant for my plans. So I listened. The darn ship was haunted. That was their stuff. They were plumb scared, the whole bunch, except three cold-blooded Chinks who'd the nerve of the whole flock. I listened and I agreed. I told 'em I'd seen it, too, and was just as badly scared as they were. But I wasn't a darn fool, and wasn't yearning for an open boat for the sake of a crazy shadow. Then I pretended savage and told 'em to get right back to their sennet an' holystone, or I'd dose their darn guts with lead. It acted the way I wanted. They tried to rush me. I had Jim Shan, the steward,

with me. A sign from him, and the other three Chinks lent a hand. They turned on the bunch. And I unloosed. There was a tough scrap, but we beat 'em back. When they were rightly cowed I handed 'em the thing I'd do. They could have one of the launches. It was a hundred miles to Seattle. They could have the vittles and get. They went. And the darn third officer went with 'em. And next day it blew a howling winter gale. I guess they'd as much chance as cordite in hell. I was left with four Chinks which included Jim Shan.

"We had a mighty tough time for two days. But we were quit of that shadow. There were four of us to handle wheel and sail, and one was a cook. But the boys had shortened down before they went and we had to chance the rest. Anyway we got through. And after that the weather set dead fair and we crawled up the coast. But the shadow came again and someway it worried me. Then I played my last trump. I told Jim Shan the story of the gold, and promised him equal shares with his friends if we got it through to the coast. Say, those boys. Ever seen a Chink with the yearning for gold looking out of his queer, snake eyes. It's not good to look at.

"Do you need more?" Julian Caspar shook his head as his queer eyes searched the implacable face of McLagan. "But of course you do. You're the sort to want every ounce of your pound. Well, you can have it. I'm looking for that dog's chance for more than one reason."

He passed his manacled hands up to his shock of hair, and tried to run them back over it. Then they dropped again to his lap.

"The rest was easy—in a way. I set right in to work to change the vessel's name, and it took me guessing hard. I had to think like hell not to leave

a clue. Those boys helped me, and Jim Shan was the neatest hand with paint and a brush I ever located. We did it all right. And the vessel was sort of re-born the *Limpet*, an' the name amused me. But it was the waiting around and watching those Chinks. Say, ever waited around with a bunch more used to knives than Bibles? Gee! Then there was that cursed shadow. Say, I've got nerve. But there's things to break the best nerve if you only locate 'em. It was that shadow. There wasn't a day I didn't sit at that cabin table, with the alley-way facing me, that I couldn't see that shadow traipsing—traipsing—Psha! I could have shut the door. I could have sat elsewhere. But someway I hadn't the grit to do it. No. I had to keep an eye on that shadow all the time—and on those Chinks.

"Well, it don't signify now. I'd got it all fixed ready. We were making our get away that night. Then I was eating my food. I'd been sitting watching the crazy antics of the shadow in the sun and sudden I got sick in the pit of the stomach. I quit. I quit right there and hailed the Chinks. Well, those boys lasted long enough to crowd on every stitch of canvas. They lasted long enough to launch the motor with the gold and vittals stowed. They lasted long enough to clear the vessel's side and head for the coast. Then they died quick. All four got lead poisoning, and I dropped 'em over the side. It was them or me, and I knew it. I wasn't yearning. So I pumped 'em plumb up to the plimsol full of lead, and set 'em where their knives couldn't reach me. Then——"

"You ran for the mouth of the Lias," McLagan broke in. "You ran in and cached your stuff in a cave you didn't reckon folks 'ud locate. And stowed your launch where you didn't see anything but sea fowl nosing."

"You swine!"

McLagan nodded.

"That's all right," he said straightening himself up. "Don't worry for compliments. That's not in the story. Yes. I've got your gold. There'll be an embargo on your credit at Victor Burn's bank. And the launch is away up on the Alsek river where its use in my oil workings 'll keep it in shape. But you've got your dog's chance. I promised that, and you're going to get it. It's a hell of a poor-bred dog's chance. Loose those irons, Len. I'll hold him covered so ther's no monkeying. He reckons he'd like to translate his opinion of me into something more active. But he won't. Loose him——"

"But—Say you're not going——?"

Len Stern, with his whole mind and body seething with the horror of the thing he had listened to, stared at the engineer incredulously.

"Loose him? What——?"

McLagan nodded.

"Yes. Loose him, boy. I promised him that. I promised him a run for it. It was the price of his yarn. Leave it that way boy. Loose him, and let's get out into God's pure air. This place is foul with the stench of his rotten soul."

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They were out in the open where the air was pure, and the full daylight was pleasant to contemplate after the contaminated atmosphere of Julian Caspar's quarters. The latter was somewhere behind them, free to undertake anything his evil mind prompted. But McLagan felt no concern as they moved down the slope to the mouth of the creek debouching on the broad waters of the Lias River. It was left to the more hot-headed Len Stern to concern himself.

"I don't get it, McLagan," he said urgently.

"You've let that rotten murderer free for the sake of his darn story. You've let him free after murdering poor Jim. Claire's brother! The brother of the gal you're to marry this fall! It's wrong. It's crazy. He——"

He broke off to gaze back up the hill at the shack that was still in full view.

"I can't stand for it, Mac," he went on hotly, a moment later. "We came here that that boy should swing for the thing he's done. You said that. You——"

"He will swing, Len. He'll swing within twenty-four hours."

McLagan's tone was cold. His manner was inflexible. And somehow the other remained silent.

They rounded a broad bluff of woodland that mounted the hillside, and all view of Caspar's hut was obscured. Now the great waters of the Lias came into view. Its wide valley opened out in a splendid picture of forest, and hill, and the smiling sheen of the river's waters.

"You beat me, Mac," Len went on, in a tone of puzzlement. All his protest had died out of his manner. "How? He'll hang in twenty-four hours? Will you tell me?"

McLagan's pace increased. He was gazing away down at the great river. And suddenly a hot light filled his eyes, and left them frowning.

"Len, boy, cut it all out," he cried irritably. "What sort of white-livered bunch of craziness do you take me for? What have I been working for these weeks, an' months, but to hand that boy his med'cine? Say, if you'd been here months back and seen that poor mother woman's grief, that poor girl's grief, you'd have known some of the thing I feel. Those two gentle souls are mine. One of 'em's going to be my wife, to live with me through the

years of our lives. That boy's going to die the only right way for a feller of his sort. He's going to hang—just as sure as God."

He laughed mirthlessly.

"I can't bring that poor feller, Jim, back alive," he went on. But I can see that feller hangs. Why, I owe it him anyway for myself. If he lived he'd get me one way or another. No. He's going to swing as I say."

"How d'you know?"

The landing on the river was in full view when Len put his sharp question. Sasa Mannik was down there with his canoe waiting watchfully his boss's return.

McLagan turned. His face was unsmiling.

"That's not for you—yet. Someday you may learn things. Meanwhile get a holt on this. You've my word of honour as a man the thing's as I say."

Stern nodded.

"That surely goes, Mac," he said. "But tell me. You see, you've got me badly guessing. Why for did you send me out of that shack to—fix his ponies? We're on the river. We're travelling by water."

McLagan laughed.

"That's easy, boy. The talk of ponies was bluff. I didn't have a notion of running that feller into Beacon. Not a notion from the start. You see, I didn't let you know the thing in my mind because of questions I didn't feel like answering. No. I left you thinking he was passing right into Beacon. I sent you out to fix his ponies because I had to make a talk. And I didn't want a chance of you getting hot with the things I said and queering the game. *I had to get that boy's yarn.* You see, the thing I reckoned to fix was justice, not revenge. Well, it would have been justice handing him over to Goodchurch. But I didn't fancy that. The law's

queer and slow. It would have been a worry to Jim's mother, to Claire. To all of us. It would have stirred up memories for those women-folk, and would have hurt 'em. So I looked for better, quicker, surer means. But I've a queer sort of conscience that wouldn't be satisfied with circumstantial evidence. I had to hear of the thing he'd done out of his own mouth. So I offered him a run for freedom to hand me his yarn. It was wiser than it looked. You see, I knew the man. He knew the thing he'd done. And he guessed what it would mean going on to Fairbanks. Given a run, he's confident of making his get away. His life's more precious to him than the chance he takes handing out his story. I felt that—knowing him. My promise to him was a run for freedom, and he guessed it was good enough. You see, he didn't know the thing I know. Now the thing's sheer justice. He's condemned himself. And the thought of his hanging leaves me without a qualm or—scruple. Let's leave it that way, boy. I've given my word to you. Now we're going to make my home place to hand over your gold to you, and to close up my shanty. Then for Beacon."

"Shall I learn for sure—when it's done?"

McLagan smiled gently as they paced down the hill. He understood the other's feelings. He realised how hard, without further explanation, it must be for this man, who had been absent so long from the country, to accept his assurance. So he laid a reassuring hand upon his arm.

"Yes, Len. And," he added, "believe me his hanging's as inevitable as that the sun'll rise to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXII

THE QUITTING

"ARE you satisfied, Len? Does it make you feel good?"

McLagan was observing the dark, mobile features of the younger man. They were alight with the look he knew so well. It was the expression he had seen time and again in those men of Beacon whose whole horizon was bounded by gold and all it meant in their lives. It was a similar expression to that which had played in Len Stern's features at that time when his strong fingers had raked through the heaping gold-dust spread out before him at the far-off camp on the Australian coast.

McLagan was more than interested. For the man was gazing upon the goodly pile of smallish canvas bags lying on the earthen floor against the log wall of the hut overlooking the mouth of the Alsek River. At that moment humanity was uppermost in the engineer. A goodly satisfaction was stirring in his heart. And his manner had lost much of that roughness which was so characteristic of him.

Len nodded, his eyes remaining fascinated by the thing they were gazing upon.

"That don't begin to say the thing I feel," he said

awkwardly. He raised a strong, sunburnt hand and passed it back over his forehead. Then he laughed. It was a short, jerky laugh that was an expression of some feeling he had no words for. "Do you know how a shipwrecked feller 'ud feel when his feet find solid earth again?" He shook his head. "That's how those bags of dust make me feel. That, an' something else. Yes, I feel I want to say all sorts of stuff how I think of you. But I can't."

McLagan brushed aside the man's desire to express his gratitude.

"But you weren't shipwrecked?" he said quickly.

The other's reply came with a laugh.

"It cost me all but my last thousand dollars to answer that message you sent out, and—get around."

"But you were on a big strike? You, and poor Jim?"

"Sure. The biggest in the world—on a fever racked coast that I'll never get near to again. The fever got me. I only got away by the scruff of my neck. And the stuff I took out did little more than satisfy the dope merchants of Perth who did their best for me. I guess I was shipwrecked both ways. Physical and financial. Man, you've done an almighty glad thing."

McLagan sat himself on the cabin trunk just behind him, and Len Stern flung himself into the chair which usually stood against the table where McLagan was accustomed to work. The small wood stove, radiating a pleasant warmth in the chill of the late summer air, stood between them. And Len Stern mechanically held out the palms of his hands to it.

There was physical weariness in him. It was the same with the hard-driving engineer. The voiceless waste of desolate muskeg with its surface of shaking

tundra lay far behind them now. So with the wearisome portage to the Alsek River meandering through its coal-laden, oil-soaked territory of hills. The gateway to the ocean had been reached and passed only that morning. And now they had gained the shelter of McLagan's home overlooking the bay, ready for the last stage of that effort which had been crowded into days that should have been weeks.

It had all been a whirlwind rush from the moment of Stern's landing until this return to McLagan's home. Stern was the least weary of the two. But then he and Sasa Mannik had had the blessed break of a day's complete rest up at McLagan's oil camp, while the engineer endured an added gruelling in the work that was his. He had spent the time with Peter Loby in completing preparations for the time when the men of finance behind him should arrive to set the seal of their approval upon his achievements. It had meant a swift change of effort for him from that which had been an expression of a man's deepest emotions to the sheerly mental aspect of those affairs which represented the material side of his life.

They had eaten the midday meal with which Sasa Mannik's indifferent skill had provided them. And the whole place was a-litter with books, charts, papers, and clothing, hopelessly mixed up with the utensils of the meal of which they had just partaken. They were in the midst of the preparations for McLagan's final quittance, which was to take place that day. It was a portentous operation regarded without optimism by the engineer. And Len Stern, while ready and willing, found himself of little service.

McLagan lit one of his long, lean cigars, glad enough to abandon his labours for a few minutes. Stern lit and drearily sucked his charred old briar.

The contemplation of those bags of gold-dust, that never in his most fantastic dreams he had hoped to see again, had warmed his heart and eased the strain he had laboured under.

It was all very amazing, and McLagan himself was the most amazing thing of it all. It was all mystifying, too. And as he sat luxuriating in the reek of his pipe the man from Australia found himself marvelling at the mystery in the midst of which he had found himself so suddenly plunged.

He knew now that McLagan had been responsible for the message Goodchurch had sent out. Even its enticing wording. At the time he had read it in the local news-sheet in Perth he had not seriously considered it beyond the reply he must make. Then had come his arrival at the coast on the tubby mail-boat on its way to Seward. Then his meeting with McLagan, and his instant whirling off on a breathless rush that was only just about to terminate. He had been asked very little and told less. McLagan had relied on visual rather than verbal demonstration. He had seen the *Imperial* again after believing the vessel to be fathoms deep at the bottom of the ocean. He had gazed upon some weird, supernatural demonstration upon her deck. He had been hurried off to help in the capture of the man who had murdered his partner, and robbed them of the fruits of their labours. The capture had been achieved and a confession extracted. Then he had been called upon to agree to the murderer's release. True he had the assurance of McLagan that the murderer would not, could not escape. But——

And now he was sitting in McLagan's home gazing on the wealth of gold-dust that he and poor Jim Carver had washed out on the fever-laden coast of Australia. It had come back to him. And McLagan was the man who had recovered it. How? How?

How had it all been achieved? How had McLagan discovered in the *Limpet* of Boston the foul tragedy of his friend's death, and recovered for him the gold that had been stolen. The mystery of it all; McLagan's refusal to enlighten him; these things were utterly confounding. In his own phraseology he felt the whole thing was just "one darn mystery after another," and he wanted to fling up his hands in complete helplessness.

But there was no outward expression of these feelings. He sat gladly regarding that small, comforting pile of wealth which McLagan had told him was his.

"I'm glad you've told me that, Len." McLagan's smile was almost gentle. "We haven't told much, have we?"

"No. And sometimes I feel it 'ud be good to tell—things."

Len Stern's eyes came back from the pile of gold. It almost seemed as though McLagan had broached something of a deeper interest for him.

"Maybe it would. Well, ther's Claire and her mother 'll be yearning." McLagan laughed. "And I'll be there, too."

"Which is just another way of saying you haven't a thing you're going to tell."

Len grinned into the other's face and shook some juice out of his pipe stem on to the stove.

"It doesn't mean just that, boy," McLagan said.

"No?"

Len waited. Then he went on.

"See, McLagan, you've done a swell thing. Sure I don't want to say a thing to hurt. You've left me guessing, an' I'm content to go right on guessing if it suits you. You see, I'm just thankful. But maybe you won't mind saying 'Why,' if you object to 'How.' The only thing that finds me worrying is leaving that swine Caspar free."

McLagan removed the cigar from his strong mouth. He rolled it between his fingers, which seemed to crush it unnecessarily. He shook his head.

"I'm not yearning to tell 'why' any more than 'how,'" he said, with a return to his rougher manner. "It wouldn't hurt a thing telling it, except for the laugh it's liable to raise. You see, boy, I've a head full of notions. Some of 'em some folks might reckon sort of crazy. But they aren't. They're just a throw back to something that's in us all. The only thing is I've given way to 'em, and they've got so that I have to hand 'em best. One time I felt the only thing in life was to make good. I'm older since then. I still guess that making good needs to be done, but I get tired beating the other feller. It kind of seems waste of effort, unless the other feller needs beating. I'm glad for poor old Jim, who's Claire's brother, to be able to hand you back his dough. Then it'll make things better for you. You two boys were swell triers taking a Chink yarn for gospel. Good luck, boy, anyway. Handle that stuff right when you get it into Beacon."

"I'll do the best I know, Mac. Say—That oil play of yours? It looks like beating every other feller. It's big. It's big for Beacon, an' the folks around."

McLagan's smile deepened.

"Sure," he said simply. "It means so much I can't just see it all. This'll be a swell country after awhile. It'll get oil-crazy when I let my story go."

"They don't know yet?"

McLagan shook his head.

"They will when I get in this time. And I want it that way. You know this country's got right into my bones. I want to set the decent citizens lying around it whooping with the things that make life easy, and pass 'em a time that won't leave 'em yearn-

ing to muss themselves with the dirt lying back of human nature. What'll you do? Quit for the sun places?" He glanced down at the gold bags significantly. "With that bunch a wise guy don't need to worry beyond this coast."

"That's so."

Len was thoughtfully regarding his treasure. He looked up with a grin.

"Maybe I'll do what I know to get into your proposition."

McLagan laughed.

"You'll need to do it on the jump. In a month ther won't be money enough in the world to buy our stock. You haven't seen a circumstance of what's to come later. Gee! I must get on with all this truck."

McLagan rose with a sigh of real weariness. He flung open the trunk on which he had been sitting, and passed over to a pile of folded suits. He stood for a moment contemplating them. They were clothes he had never worn since he came to the coast. He picked some of them up, and came back to the trunk. Len rose to aid him. He moved over to pass him the rest of the piled clothes. He picked up some of them, and revealed a folded white garment underneath. It caught and held his attention. It was voluminous, and, at first glance, appeared to be some sort of bath robe, or dressing gown. But the top fold of it had three cut holes in it, which looked like the eye and mouth holes of a mask.

McLagan came to his side and Len heard a deep-throated chuckle.

"Guessing, boy?" the engineer said quietly. Then he added: "I'd forgot that, sure."

Then he reached down and picked it up. He let it drop to its full length, and held it out by its arms. Len deposited his garments and gazed at it grinning.

"Some suit," he said.

McLagan nodded.

"Sure," he said. And surveyed the conical, visored hood hanging down, and the many rust stains that besmirched its otherwise immaculate surface.

Then he very deliberately refolded it and looked squarely into his companion's eyes.

"Makes you want to laff, Len, eh?" he said. "Don't you do it, boy. Ther's no feller needs to laff who sees that."

Then his own eyes became less serious, and a twinkle of humour looked out of them.

"It's just one of my notions. I designed it myself. And I keep it by me to remind me. I guess it won't mean a thing to you, ever. Maybe it'll just add another guess to the things worrying you now. Set it down a bath gown which you wear when you're either clean or want to be clean. But it's another meaning, another significance. It's a symbol. That darn white gown tells me every time I look at it that human nature can't ever be run right by academic theory or sentimental slobber. The feller that guesses to persuade human nature by argument is only one degree better than the boy in the bughouse. The notion that human nature is predominantly good is plumb busted. It hands me a story of the unutterable weakness of the modern methods by which human nature is trying to govern itself, and warns me that the only thing to bring about better conditions is to scare it plumb to death first, and beat it over the head with a club after. I didn't mean you to see that thing, boy. But you have seen it and I don't figure it matters any—now. Still if you reckon you're obliged to me, why, just forget you've seen it. Let's pack up all this junk. Gee! Ther's a hell of a lot of it."

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Departure from the bay was delayed longer than McLagan had designed. It was delayed until the following morning by reason of one of those fierce, late-summer storms of tornado-like force, which at times descended upon the tattered coast.

It started with a rush of wind sweeping down off the hills. It came with the force of a hurricane, and set the hut creaking and groaning under its spasmodic pressure. For half an hour it battled furiously, shrieking, howling, crashing its way through forest, and valley, and over hill-top. And then, as suddenly as it had leapt, it abated into an ominous calm.

The respite was illusive. It was sufficiently long for the men in the hut to interpret the conditions. The sudden darkening of the whole of the western sky was sufficiently indicative. Then the real storm broke. It broke in from the ocean with the rising tide, driving in direct opposition to the land wind. An electric storm, it came with sub-tropical intensity, and a fury of wind. The play of lightning was blinding; the thunderous detonations were merged into an incessant roar; and the suddenly opened heavens poured a deluge of rain upon a darkened world.

The storm raged for hours. It raged far into the night. And deep under the fury of it all the voice of the sea came up from below like the roar of a monster lashed and goaded to savage anger. It boomed, it thundered, its echoes playing from cliff to cliff, magnified and terrifying.

Clad in an oilskin, at the height of the storm, McLagan sought the open. He stood out on the plateau, and instantly his great body seemed to become the centre of elemental attack. But he gave no heed. He forced his way in the blinding rain as near to the precipitous edge of the cliff as he dared approach it. Then he stood there swaying to

the buffets of the storm while he strove to penetrate the grey pall with which the rain enveloped the world below him. It was useless. And so, at last, he returned to shelter, and the exercise of such patience as he could command.

Dawn saw a complete reversal, a complete transformation. A keen, crisp north-west wind had set in, and the furies of the night had been wholly swept away. The sun rose glorious in a cloud-flecked sky, and the world of the coast was as nearly smiling as Nature ever permitted.

But the smile of Nature meant nothing to the men who, ready to set out on their run into Beacon, stood gazing down upon the bay. The wreck of the *Imperial* was gone. Completely, utterly vanished. A few baulks of timber had been flung high up on the rocks at the foot of the southern cliff, but of the wreck, in its familiar form, not a sign was to be discovered. The ebb of the tide was at its lowest. The rocks on which she had lain were bare. The vessel had gone as she had come, on the race of the tide. But with the difference that her shattered hull had been carried off piecemeal by the victorious adversary she had defied so long.

McLagan was the first to turn away. Sasa Mannik was standing by the ponies hitched to the laden buckboard. He moved over to him and in silence climbed into the driving seat of the ramshackle vehicle. Then he called to Len Stern, who was still gazing down upon the cemetery of that poor, restless shadow of the man who had been his friend and partner.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PASSING OF THE "CHIEF LIGHT"

REBECCA CARVER was primly seated at one end of a well-upholstered couch. Her slight form was very erect, very much supported in garments that seemed somehow strange to it. Her dark eyes were steadily fixed upon the work in her hands, and the expression of them was carefully concealed. Her greying hair was neatly dressed for the occasion, and she looked to be holding herself schooled for the moment, and the unaccustomed surroundings in which she found herself.

It was a seat she rarely enough occupied. But then the parlour of her frame home had no appeal for her. She somehow felt she belonged to other spheres, to another life than that to which the adventurous genius of her daughter Claire had so suddenly elevated her. Still, she did her best staunchly enough, for all there were times when she wondered, times when she had been almost terrified at the thought of the crash in their fortunes which must inevitably come. But perhaps the greatest strain of all was her thought for Claire herself, her dread for her moral undoing. Hers was the mother's lot when the reins pass from her

hands, and advancing years bring the slow decay of her authority.

Her black silk gown left her feeling wholly self-conscious. Never in her hard-lived life had she possessed anything quite so splendid. And somehow the rustle of it was pleasant to her simple mind, and she hoped fervently that a prolonged sitting would not completely "muss" it. A silk work-bag was beside her on the couch, and her hard-worn hands were busily plying knitting-needles whose homely click afforded her no small measure of encouragement.

Len Stern was talking from a highly polished chair opposite her. He had been talking for some time, and seemed to be addressing her particularly. The play of his dark eyes was vividly expressive of the thrilling details of the long story he had had to tell to the mother of his dead friend, while the two others in the room seemed, for the time being, to have no claim upon him.

Ivor McLagan was standing at a window with his back turned, labouring under a feeling that his presence was something of an intrusion upon that which should have been sacred to the bereaved mother. But he knew he must be there for clear and definite reasons. And so he persisted. Claire was near to him. There could be no question of her greed for the story she was listening to. Her blue eyes were wide with almost painful interest. Her hands, those slender hands which were the admiration of all at the Speedway, were tightly clasped in her lap. She was leaning forward eagerly, and hanging intently upon every word the man uttered.

Len Stern had told all the story of the gold discovery, and of the drear life of that fever-ridden coast. He had told of his desperate journey to secure a man and a ship to serve their purpose. He had told of the great day when the shipment was made, and he

bade farewell to the loyal creature who was thrilling with the thought of all that their wealth would mean to his women-folk at home. He had reached the point of his narrative where he was standing on the beach watching the breaking out of the vessel's sails as she put to sea.

"It was a great day, mam," he said, with a smile that was deeply reminiscent. "You just can't think the greatness of it. That boy, he was good grit. Gold? Yes, he wanted that gold, his share. But it was only for the folks at home. The mother and the sister he'd left behind. His whole thought, mam, all the time was for you."

The mother sniffed violently, and a work-worn hand brushed aside a tear that blurred the stitches of her knitting. The next moment the click of her needles came more rapidly.

"I got back to work—alone," Len went on. Then he drew a deep sigh which ended in an expletive. "Gee! How I worked." He laughed. "It's queer how hard a boy can work when he's alone, an' trying to keep from going crazy. That's how it was with me. Why, I must have got out an' washed a million dollars of stuff before it happened. Gold? Why, the whole of that river bed was gold from end to end. There's the gold of the world there. An' one day some bunch 'll get around and clear out the fever, and just snow the world's market right under with the stuff. But it wasn't for me—or Jim. That fever hit me within two weeks of Jim's quitting. It came slow. It made me sick. And I was wise to it. You see, the Chink had told us. Well, it didn't take me two jumps to reckon the thing I must do. I knew I must get out right away. I must beat it in that shell of a smack of ours down the coast to Perth, the same as I'd done before. I'd just have to get there and wait around for Jim to get back. It was a big

chance. I was getting sicker every hour. But I had to take it. So I loaded all the dust I could take, cached the rest, stowed my kit, and—drove out to sea."

He drew a deep breath as the memory of things stirred him. McLagan had turned regarding him. Even Claire, who had sat almost immovable, stirred restlessly. Then he went on to the accompaniment of the click of the mother's needles.

"Maybe it saved me. I don't know. Y'see, the sea air's clean, and likely it helped. Anyway, I was full of fever and pains, and wanted to lie around all the while. But I didn't. I had to make the course I knew, and the will of it all drove me. I can't reckon even now how long it was, or how I ever reached Perth right. But I reached it in the end after storm, and calm, and sickness. But I'd lost a big bunch of my stuff. You see, I had to fight myself as well as the weather. I was swamped out and nearly plumb wrecked a dozen times. When I did get in I was nigher dead than alive, and they set me right into hospital.

"It was tough. And before they were through with me it had cost me most of my stuff. Still, I wasn't worried with that. There was plenty more, and, when Jim came back and I was feeling good, why, it would be easy. Quite easy, for all I was scared to death of that coast."

He passed a hand back over his dark hair.

"But time went on an' I never heard a word. And then—and then came word of—Jim's ship. It set me nigh crazy. I waited, and thought, and worried. I never got another word. Then I thought to send you folks word. Then I was scared to do it. Mam, you don't know the way I felt. Jim gone——"

"Drowned. Drowned right in mid-ocean."

McLagan's voice broke in harshly, and Len glanced

round quickly. Claire, too, turned. She looked up, a sharp question in her eyes.

McLagan nodded.

"It hit you, Len, boy to know Jim was—drowned. It hit us folks, too."

Len turned again to the mother who was gazing at him from behind a mist of tears.

"Say, mam, it hit us all bad, to know Jim was drowned with the sinking of that ship in mid-ocean. It hurts me now to think of it. An' God knows the way it must hurt you folks. But I didn't get along to stir up bad memories. I came to tell Jim's mother of the wonderful boy Jim was, and make her feel pride in his grit, an' honesty, and—and the hell of a fine partner he was to me. He was plumb gold all through. Bright shining gold. He'd got just one notion in the world, mam. It was for his mother and his sister. After them came his partner. You know, mam, someways I feel, and I'd be glad to know you feel it, too, Jim came by his death doing one great big act. He'd sweated and laboured, and he was carrying home all the fruit of the love of his big heart to his—mother. Does it make you feel good? Yes, sure it does. I can see——"

The mother had flung her knitting aside. Her work-worn hands were thrust up, covering her tear-streaming eyes. She sprang to her feet and stood sobbing for a moment. Then Claire came to her side, and with one warm arm flung about the older woman's shaking shoulders, she led her from the room.

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Claire and McLagan were walking down the dusty, unpaved road in the direction of the city's main highway. Len Stern had already departed to transact his business at Victor Burn's bank. The mother had

gone back to the work that always claimed her, comforted far more than she knew by the revelation of the staunch devotion of her dead son.

Once clear of the house Claire raised her wide, questioning eyes to the face of the man beside her.

"Why did you jump in while Len was talking?" she asked abruptly. "Why did you remind him that Jim was—drowned?"

McLagan's reply came on the instant.

"Because he wasn't drowned, and—Len knows it."

"Murdered?"

"Sure."

"Then why not say it? Why——?"

"Say, Claire," McLagan broke in with that roughness she knew so well, "do you think I'd brought Len along to tell your Mum that Jim was foully murdered and robbed? No. I know it. You know it. We're young and strong, and it's not going to hurt us, seeing poor Jim is dead anyway. But she's his mother. Think, my dear, just think. Len and I fixed it up to say that. I jumped, scared he might blurt out the truth. Jim's mother is someone we both love. Right deep in her heart now is the swell thought of all that boy was trying to do for her. He died doing it. To her there's no picture of a foul murder with the murderer standing over him and robbing him. Don't you see? Sure you do. For all her tears I guess we've left Jim's mother a mighty happy woman. An' she'll never be told the thing that really happened."

The girl made no reply. Somehow the man's harshly spoken rebuke thrilled her as no word of his had ever thrilled her before. Her love for him rose to something like worship as she regarded his plain face and thought of the world of kindly sympathy lying behind it. Her next words were almost humble.

"And the murderer?"

"Is dead. Hanged by the neck, and—dead."

The intensity, the biting ruthlessness of the man's tone were in flat contradiction of his recent mood.

"Then what you thought, what you hoped of Len's coming—proved out?"

"Surely."

"Does Len know? Did he—help?"

"Len has my assurance. That's all."

"Will I ever know the whole thing—you know?"

McLagan smiled upon the dingy habitations about him.

"Maybe some day," he said. "But—not right now. It's a bad story."

They had turned out of the side road, and on to the sidewalk of the main thoroughfare. It was still within the business hours of the place, and as Claire gazed about her a certain unusual movement was observable among the people. She drew a deep sigh.

"Sometimes I think it awful of me," she said, a little desperately. "He's dead. Hanged. The man who murdered Jim. I'm—glad. Yes," she went on a little defiantly, "I'm glad. And Jim's gold?"

"Recovered—most of it. And passed to the feller it rightly belongs. Len Stern. That boy needs it. You don't, Claire. Your mother don't. You're both—my affair."

"Yes. We don't need it—anyway."

McLagan smiled at the little touch of independence in the girl's words.

They were approaching the Plaza with its balcony and its loungers. He could see the face of Jubilee Hurst leaning out gazing in their direction. And he knew the thing that was coming.

Jubilee's challenge came on the instant of their approach. It came full of all that irresponsible lightness which masked the real seriousness of the man.

"Ho, Mac!" he cried. "Is it true? Is it real, or have I got a bad nightmare? I've turned over a couple of times but it's still the same. I can't get away from the messy sight of crude oil streaming all through the streets of Beacon. Is it true? Or are you yearning to see us poor folk plumb bug?"

Claire and McLagan smiled up into the eager face. They realised the presence of the others on the verandah. There was Abe Cranfield. And Burt Riddell was gloomily inquiring as he leant over the rail beside his partner.

"It's all true."

It was Claire who replied. She nodded laughingly. And in her eyes was a gladness that illuminated her whole countenance. Then she indicated the man beside her.

"You see, Ivor's got the close habit, and I guess it isn't easy for him to say 'yes.' Maybe now I've saved you getting bug he can hand you the rest."

McLagan nodded.

"I guessed you'd be wise in a half-hour. That's why I chose Doc Finch to hand out the news. He's better than a hundred telephones. Yes, boy, it's all true. There's oil enough to float a ship. Get in, if you've two cents to buy with. Maybe there's weeks of grace while my folks play the market. So get in, or our stocks 'll jump sky high. You'll find it more profitable than a hand at Claire's table."

Jubilee eyed the girl. He realised the wonderful light shining in her pretty eyes. But it was the sad voice of Burt Riddell that answered him.

"Maybe it's more profitable. But me for the hand at Claire's table. Say, you ain't going to rob us of that?"

McLagan laughed outright.

"When it comes to guessing I'd say you've Jubilee beat a mile."

"What d'you mean?" Jubilee looked from one to the other and grinned. "Burt got me beat guessing?" He shook his head. "Not on your life, Mac. I didn't have to guess. I—knew. Say, it beats hell. My best to you both, Claire. The Speedway'll be hell without you, but—Gee, I must go count my cents. It don't seem right buying oil with 'em when I'm yearning to hand you a swell bouquet. Say, look down the sidewalk. See the folks? Doc's sure been busy. Well, so long. Will you be around at the Speedway to-night? '*Bon,*' as we used to say in France," he cried, as the engineer nodded. "It'll beat Max's festival to the bone. Come on, Burt. Let's get a look at our cents and see how best we can roll Victor to help things out."

Claire and McLagan passed on, and the sight of the engineer caused a commotion and excitement that had been unknown in Beacon since the early days of the boom. It was as McLagan had said it would be. The town was already oil-crazy. The man's progress was something in the nature of a triumphal procession. There were smiles and greetings and handshakes almost every step of the way, till McLagan felt something like serious regret that he had utilised the rotund doctor as a medium for disseminating his news.

As they came to the bank, McLagan's patience had well-nigh exhausted itself.

"We'll get right inside for shelter, kid," he said in desperation. "This popularity makes me sick. This darn hand wagging with folks I don't know from a bunch of fence posts couldn't be worse if I was President of the United States. Say——"

He laughed as he discovered that Victor Burns was standing in the doorway of the bank obviously waiting for him to come up.

They were safe for the moment in Victor's private office. The banker was sitting behind his desk while Claire was occupying the most comfortable chair the place afforded. McLagan was propped on the corner of the desk listening to the thing the banker had to tell.

"I'm glad for you, McLagan," he said. "I'm glad for Beacon. And it didn't take me two seconds to guess my own feelings the moment Doc blew in and handed me his story of an oil flood that nearly wrecked your camp. I've a private bunch of dollars that's going to be changed into your Corporation's stock right away. Yes, boy, I'm glad, but I'm—worried."

"How?"

"How?" The banker looked from one to the other. Then he raised a clenched fist and brought it heavily down on his desk. A frown of unusual ill-temper had suddenly depressed his pleasant face. "It's this boy, Cy Liskard, a customer of mine. You'll remember him. It's that guy with the gold I showed you awhile back. The feller that you spread out on the Speedway floor on the night of the festival. They've hanged him. They've hanged him clean out of hand. It's those boys. The Aurora bunch. And they ticketed him with their fancy label with the signature of the Chief Light."

He snorted as he sat gazing up into McLagan's face. Claire sat up in her chair, a startled look in her eyes as she watched the unsmiling face of the man she loved.

"That don't seem a thing to worry for," McLagan said coolly. "Where did they hang him? What for?"

"Where? What for?" The banker shook his head. "They hanged him right here just beyond the town limits on the lakeside. What for? I

haven't a notion, unless it was a hold-up for his stuff. Here, you don't get me——"

"It hasn't been their way to hold a boy up for his stuff," McLagan broke in quickly. "Was he coming in with a bunch of dust?"

The banker shook his head. He spread out a pair of helpless hands.

"I can't say a thing," he declared peevishly. "Here, I'll tell you. Goodchurch came along this morning. He jumped in on me and I asked him things. He said he was guessing as badly as I was. One of his men came in and brought him word a feller was hanging under the spread of a Western Cedar, and was labelled by this precious bunch. Looked like he'd been hanging there days. He sent out to investigate and found it was this boy from the Lias, who's been toting dust in since last fall. He asked me what I knew, and I told him of his credit here. He's set a government 'hold-up' on it, and went off cursing these Aurora folk in a way I'd hate to repeat before a lady. I'm sick. I'm good and sick. I'm not worried for the boy. He was a sure tough, and I'd say he's the sort to be a deal safer off the earth. But it's the trade. It's the stuff. He was reckoning to bring more along. Say, Mac, does it look good to you? I've heard you say you'd a hunch for these boys, setting out to clean things up. Well? Is this cleaning up? Or is it the thing I've been scared of right along—a hold-up?"

McLagan shook his head. His face was mask-like in its seriousness. Claire, watching him, felt at that moment she would have given much to read the thing passing behind it.

"You can't rightly tell, Victor," he said. "But I wouldn't reckon that way without knowing more. There was sure something queer about that boy. And he was a tough, anyway." Then he smiled.

"It's queer. Here I bring you word of such wealth coming to Beacon as no gold can ever hand it. I'm showing you how to get in and help yourself. Yet you're worried for a bunch of dust that won't be a circumstance in Beacon when we open out."

He turned to the girl who was regarding him so earnestly.

"You know, kid," he said, "these men who handle gold can't see a thing but gold. They just love it to death."

He turned again to the banker.

"I wouldn't worry with the Aurora bunch, Victor," he said. "The oil boom coming is going to clean up most things. Maybe they'll go along with the rest. You see, when the government realises the thing Beacon can hand them there'll be no room for white shirts and hanging bees."

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Outside the bank the girl made no further effort to restrain the questions that were flooding her mind.

"Tell me, Ivor," she cried, the moment they reached the sidewalk again. "This man? This Cy Liskard? Oh, I remember him. I'm never likely to forget him, and the way you smashed him that night for his insult to me. Who is he? Why did they hang him? I've got to know things now Is he——?"

"The man who killed your brother, Jim. The man who murdered and robbed him. Julian Caspar, the man who was trading Jim's gold into that bank."

Claire drew a deep breath. They had turned into one of the almost undefined side roads, which was little better than a track, in order to avoid the crowd on the main street. They were making their way in the direction of the girl's home again. McLagan observed her closely. Then a half smile lit his eyes.

"It's time you knew things?" he said. Then he asked gently, almost anxiously: "What does that just mean, kid? Are you worried?"

Claire looked up. Her gaze was full of trust, full of confidence, full of pride in the big creature who had laboured so hard to capture her heart. She shook her head.

"No, dear, I'm not worried—now," she said. Then a smile full of radiant love replaced the seriousness in her eyes. "Like you, I've a hunch for those white-robed folk. I sort of feel there's no harm in them for those running straight. There's no 'hold-up' in them. But I'm wondering. When your folk have got along, and you go down country——"

"We go down country," the man corrected.

"When we go down country, how'll they get on without their—Chief Light?"

McLagan threw back his head in a great, unrestrained laugh. He suddenly took possession of the girl's arm, and patted the hand that, for the moment, rested in his.

"Guess they'll need to elect a—new one," he said.

"Jubilee?"

The girl's eyes were shining with the delight it gave her to show this great creature how deeply she had penetrated his secret.

"Maybe," he said. "I don't know, and—Psha! So long as I've got you, kid, I don't care a darn."

THE END.

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